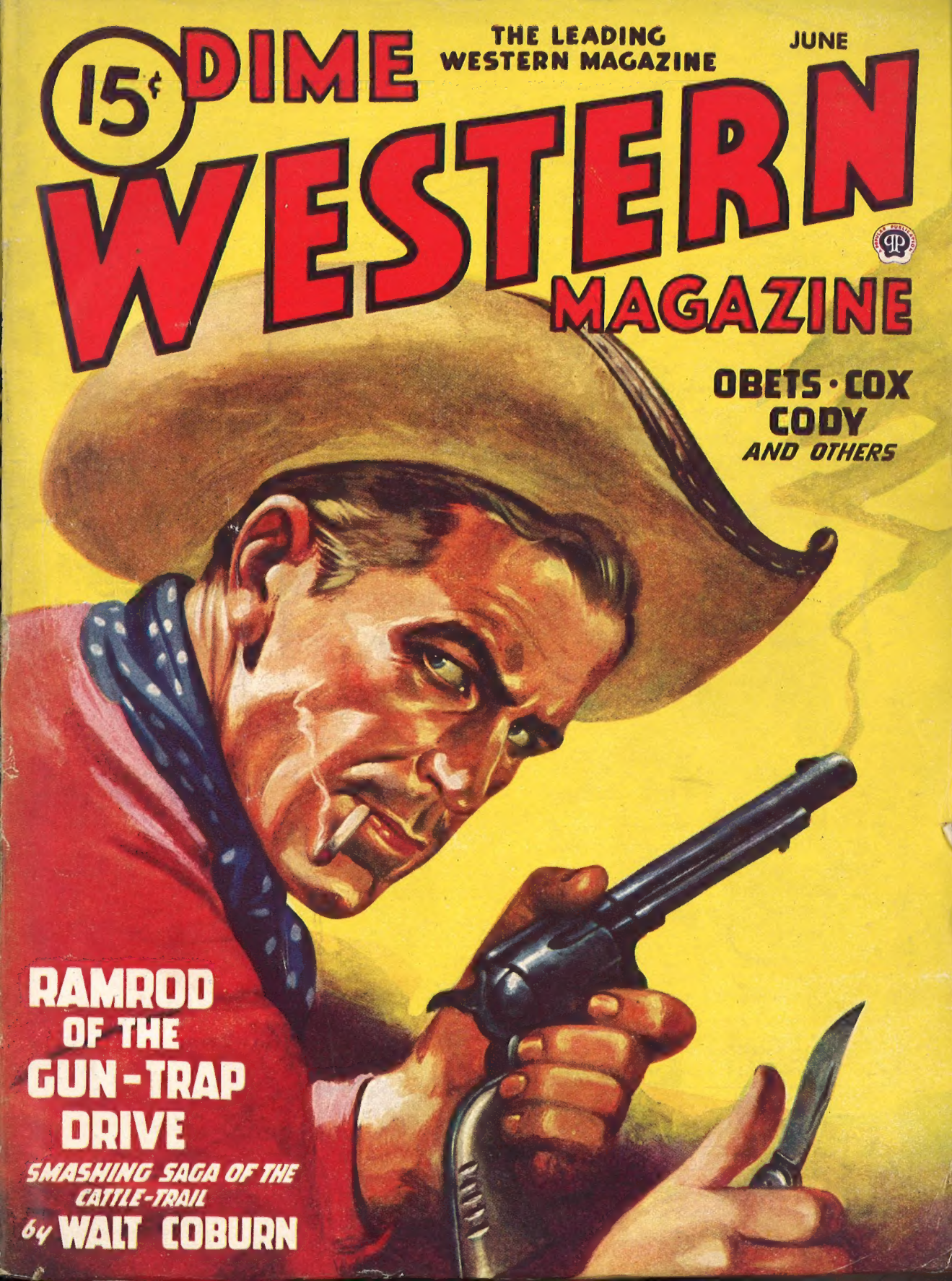
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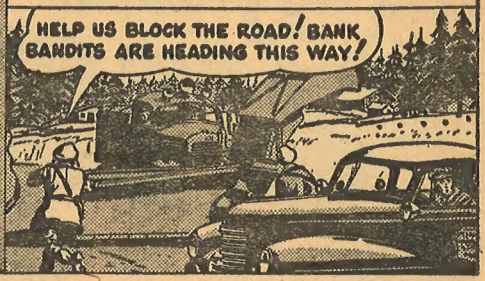

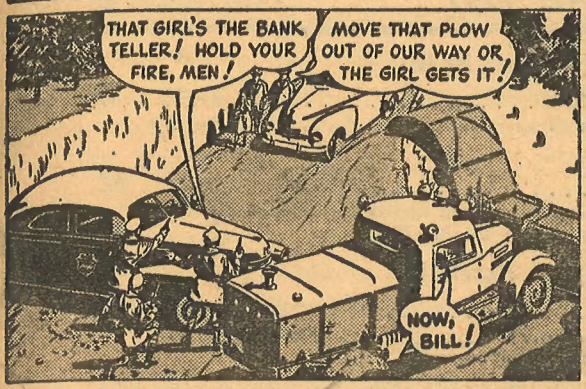

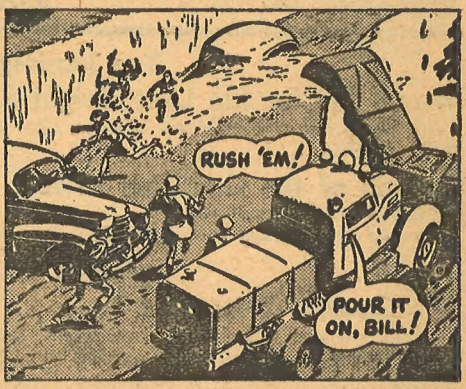

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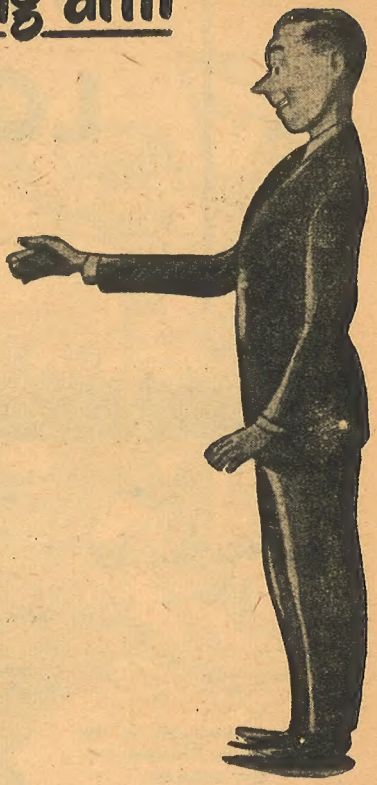

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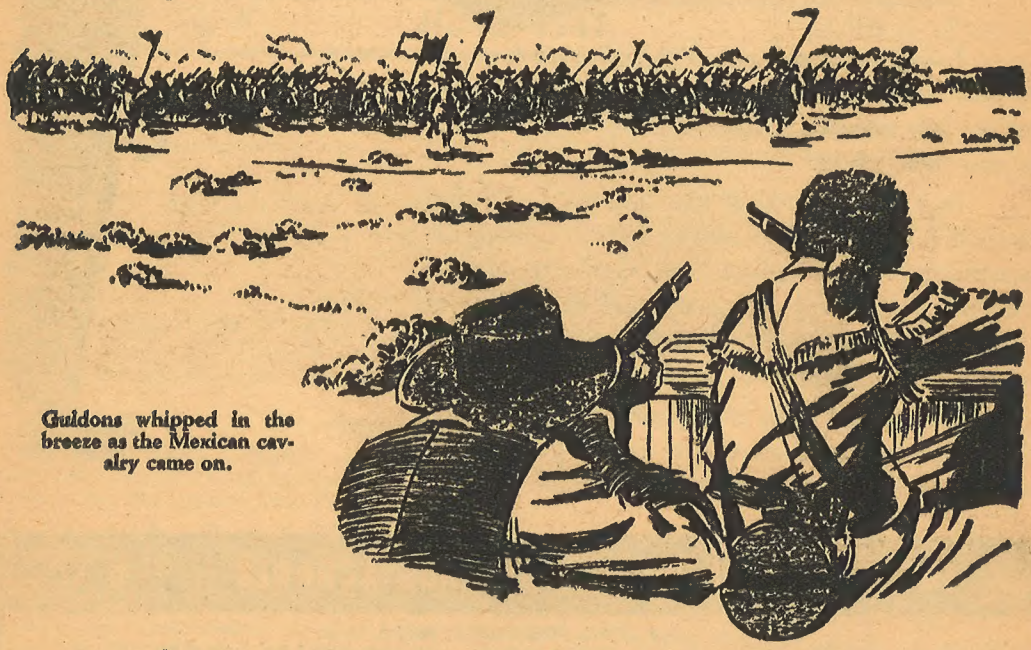
By BOB OBETS



Guidons whipped in the breeze as the Mexican cavalry came on.

Smashing Novel of the Texas Revolution

To Washington-on-the-Brazos came a sweating, weary courier bearing news that nearly broke frontier America's heart. From William Barret Travis, Commander of the Alamo: "To the People of Texas & all Americans in the world . . . Besieged by a thousand Mexicans under Santa Anna. I have sustained a continual Bombardment & cannonade for 24 hours . . . But our flag still waves from the wall. I shall never surrender or retreat. I call on you in the name of Liberty, of patriotism & everything dear to the American character, to come to our aid. . . ."

FOR THE STAR?

CHAPTER ONE

Star of Texas

THEY came to Texas in those early days, strangers to one another: A girl in search of a home, romance and an adventure-loving brother; a rich man's son who hadn't turned a lick of honest work in twenty years of existence; and a man in buckskins, on a bob-tailed horse, with enough honor and sadness behind him to do most men a lifetime. These people were destined to meet and play, each of them, a part in the struggle that made Texas free.

Suzanna Shelby, from the Smoky Mountain country of North Carolina, had turned eighteen the day she got the long-awaited letter from her younger brother Rip. It addressed her as "dere sis" and was written from "De Witt colonie Gonzales on the Warloop." It said, in part:

sis, i have cum to the land of milk & honie. a head of a familie gits a league & labor of land & i think i got me a fine gyrl all piked out (a sassie red hed!!) but you git a 4th more if you pik a meskin & some of thim sure are purtie & am thinkin it over! you mite tell uncle Bill them to pistils & kintuckie rifle have cum in handie! but cerioushe sis i mite have to go to war with the mexkins & i wish you. . . .

Suzanna was fortunate. The next week a neighboring family headed south, and the girl persuaded them to take her along. She didn't even wait to write Uncle Bill a note, saying, "G. T. T.", meaning, of course, "Gone To Texas." She slipped from the house, as had young Rip, under cover of the darkness. Rip had taken the dueling pistols and Kentucky rifle, so she had to be

content with Uncle Bill's shotgun. They said there were Indians and worse, down yonder in Texas, and a girl never knew. She might even find herself a husband who was handsome and a good provider.

Suzanna Shelby went to Texas prepared to love that wild frontier land and make it her home. Hers was the heritage of strong mountain men, like Daniel Boone. Hers was a breed ready to fight at the drop of a coonskin cap and to endure hardship and raise children in the meantime. People like Suzanna Shelby formed the backbone for this rowdy new land. . . .

* * *

Drew Calhoun, rich planter's son, was of a different turn. The Calhouns' plantation lay a few miles up the river from New Orleans. Drew seldom stayed there to enjoy the beaten bread or the deep-fat dishes or the cool mint-juleps on the wide veranda. He liked all those things, yes—was born to them—but he preferred to sip tall drinks in the St. Charles tavern; he thought the company of New Orleans' gay young blades and magnolia-skinned beauties more congenial than that of his father or of the black boys who served the colonel's drinks.

It never occurred to Drew Calhoun that his father, who was Andrew Calhoun III, or his grandfather, who was Andrew Calhoun II, had fought and worked with their own hands so that Andrew Calhoun IV might enjoy the fruits thereof. Common men should work, true; but a gentleman should direct the work of others. He should know how to handle a deck of cards or a dueling pistol; how to take his drinks like a Southern gentleman, how to make soft talk in the wistaria-scented moonlight. It was a combination of these things—a deck of cards, a girl, a double tot of whisky and a handy pistol—that caused Drew Calhoun IV to leave New Orleans by night, and rather hurriedly. Like many another young rake before him, he headed for Texas. . . .

* * *

Those were dark days for old Texas. The army of General Martin Perfecto de Cos marched on San Antonio, while south of the Rio Grande, his threatening eyes already turned toward the handful of rebellious colonists, Santa Anna established dictatorship by force of arms. Stephen Austin, after long months in the dank dungeons of Mexico City, touched foot on the sandy beach at Velasco, a dying man come home to cry reluctantly, "War! War is our only recourse!"

Sons, fathers and husbands rallied along the Guadalupe. Their womenfolk, waiting in lonely cabins these fearsome times, saw an omen that heartened them: A comet, an astral wanderer, flashing brightly across the sky. But though the people could not know it then, the bright star of Texas, its Man of Destiny, had come out of Tennessee in '32, a stalwart giant riding toward the Red River with his long legs forked across a bob-tailed horse named Jack.

He rode through the red mud of El Camino Real, carrying with him, some say, five hundred dollars from President Andrew Jackson's own pocket, with secret instructions from Old Hickory concerning the future of Texas close-locked in his sombreroed head. In his buckskins he carried a passport, signed by the acting Secretary of War, requesting all Indian tribes to permit safe passage to "General Samuel Houston, a citizen of the United States, thirty-eight years of age, six-feet-two inches in stature, brown hair and light complexion."

In his heart, no doubt, lay a twinge of regret for an Indian girl named Tiana. But deeper than this, in the heart of a man who had been major-general, congressman and governor of a great state, was buried the haunting memory of Eliza Houston, who would not live with him and would not divorce him.

Whatever mission brought Samuel Houston to Texas, within him burned a glory-bright ambition which was to make his name a legend in that land.

THE storm clouds gathered. Sam Houston had a sword; in '35 he ordered, from New Orleans, a uniform with a general's stars and a sword sash to adorn it. William B. Travis led an attack on the Mexican garrison at Anahuac. One Three-legged Willie Williamson made a Fourth of July address saying the colonists' property, liberty and lives were threatened. From San Antonio de Bexar came orders for the arrest of prominent rebels, including Travis and Three-legged Willie. Don Adolfo Sterne, the alcalde of Nacogdoches, made a

stirring offer to furnish rifles for the first fifty recruits, and the New Orleans Grays promptly claimed them. The stage was set, the drama ready to unfold. War was on every tongue.

Don Samuel Houston had established himself as a lawyer in La Villa de Nacogdoches. He was much seen in the company of Miss Anna Raguet, daughter of a Pennsylvania Swiss, merchant and leading citizen of the town; and it was back to Miss Anna that Don Samuel came, proud in his new uniform with the sword sash. It is said that Miss Anna tied the sash for him, that she snipped a lock of his hair for remembrance and sent her man forth to the war. But there was a slight delay. In Nacogdoches, Thomas Rusk was recruiting a company of volunteers; and Don Samuel Houston, Commander-in-Chief of that department, must make a speech.

"All that is sacred is menaced by that dictator, Santa Anna! We must fight, Texas men! All you need is a good rifle, stout courage—and a hundred rounds of ammunition! Down with the usurper!"

To Drew Calhoun, at that moment stepping from a near-by cantina, the whole thing seemed slightly ridiculous. Rocking a little in what once had been a fashionable pair of boots, he stopped at the edge of the crowd, a well set-up young man, with beautifully tapering shoulders, straight legs and slim, strong hands. Beneath the wide brim of his hat his lips were thin and inclined to curl, and now, as he took in the scene before him, the burnished black head that the hat covered was cocked a bit to one side.

Those patriots who had already heeded Don Samuel's call stood in a ragged line, in buckskins and homespun, wearing beegums or caps of coonskin with the tails down behind. Ancient muskets and Kentucky rifles caught red glints from the dying sun and the men's stern faces might have been carved from blood-bathed stone.

Thomas Rusk, a bit to one side, used an up-ended keg for a table while he took down names. Don Samuel, using a second keg for a rostrum, made an impressive figure in his new uniform with sword and sash.

Sam Houston was more than an orator. He was Co-lon-neh, The Raven; he possessed the Cherokee's ability for colorful imagery with words, and now he pled a cause close to his heart.

Miss Anna Raguet, as had many women before her, listened and watched with dreamy eyes. Drew Calhoun's thin lips took on a slight curl.

Coming overland to Nacogdoches with a bull-train freight outfit, Calhoun had found the rain and mud constant torture. His shoulders, from shoving against mired wooden-wheeled carts, had lost considerable skin. His hair, he thought, had a new part, and he thanked God and the Comanche who had over-shot him, because he still wore it. As for corn pone and side meat, he had eaten enough of the stuff to last him a lifetime. So far as Drew Calhoun IV was concerned, they could give Texas back to the devil.

"Then, shall we surrender this wide and glorious land? No! Never! By the grace of God and black gunpowder, gentlemen, I say we'll fight!"

It was too much for one stalwart Texas son; he lifted a war whoop that should have split his lungs. Others took up the cry. The womenfolk, including Miss Anna, shouted, "Bravo! Well said, General!" and Commander-in-Chief Sam Houston raised a hand big as a ham.

Drew Calhoun's sardonic words, dropping into the warm silence, were hailstones of pure blasphemy.

"You fight for Texas, Sam. I say, give it back to the Indians!"

They say that Miss Anna's eyes flashed lightning. Belt knives slid silently out of sheaths. Those Texas men advanced upon the brash stranger; and Drew Calhoun, always the Southern gentlemen, swept off his hat and bowed low to them. The trouble was he teetered a bit, almost lost his balance, and when he recovered he found himself staring into a pair of eyes blue and as chilling as gun steel.

Said Sam, "Suh, a man in his cups I can generally excuse. But when you profane the name of Texas, suh, I demand an apology! I am waiting, and I am not a patient man."

Here, Drew pulled himself stiffly erect. He took stock of the situation and found it all bad. Still, he had his foot in it now, and a Calhoun must never retreat.

"Demand and be damned," Drew said. "Give it back to the Indians, if they're fool

enough to take it. To hell with Texas!"

THEY say that old Sam dropped a hand to his sword. The look of eagles was in his eyes, and his voice came growling like the Lord's righteous thunder.

"Suh, are you a citizen of Texas?"

Drew said that he wasn't, adding that anyway he would never admit to it.

"Then I can't place you under arrest," Sam said, "so I must demand satisfaction. Under the circumstances, we will omit the formalities. Yo' choice of arms, suh?"

Drew began to sweat a little. The alcoholic fumes were whisked from his brain as if by a magical broom. He saw before him a man big as a bear and he recalled with painful vividness that it was this same man who, at fifteen feet, had shot a certain General White through the groin. Besides, he was exiled from New Orleans; if he had to leave Texas, where could he go?

He said coldly, "Wheah I come from men demand satisfaction from their equals. I, suh, am Andrew Calhoun IV, and no Calhoun, to my knowledge, has ever accepted a challenge from a squawman." Drew's lip curled. He started to turn. The rest of it was something that should never have happened to a Calhoun.

"Grab him, boys!" Sam yelled. "If I can't use a gun, God save my dignity, I'll use the flat of my sword!"

One reformed sinner, describing this part of it later, said that old Sam looked like Moses must have just before he smote the rock with his rod. Sort of majestic and holy-like. He played a tune on the young rooster's backside that a man could have marched to.

Nobody saw the young woman in the ox-cart until she shouted at Sam, above the smacking racket he was making.

"Stop it! Shame on you! I'll shoot if I have to, so you'd better stop!"

She was standing in the cart, straight as a young pine from her native mountains. The shotgun in her brown hands pointed at Sam's sword sash and the brown eyes above the shotgun were as steady as the gun muzzle. Sam's hand held the sword arrested while he stared back at her.

"Aren't you the fine-feathered ones!" she addressed all of them, her voice sharp with scorn. "Jumping him like a pack of hound dogs! You leave him be!"

Slowly Sam's scowl changed to a smile. He put up his sword, removed his hat and bowed. "Madam," he said, "I admire yo' courage. Do you know this—gentleman?"

Drew Calhoun IV, in that moment, cut a far different figure from the immaculate young blade of New Orleans. His clothes were torn and mud-stained, his face unshaven; and all he wanted was to be away from this rude village and the rowdy characters who inhabited it. His eyes almost pleading with the girl's brown ones, he drew in a determined breath.

"Suh," he said, "this young woman is my wife. I was waiting for her when this unfortunate incident occurred."

"Madam," Sam demanded, "does he speak truth?"

Drew watched her, his nerves fairly humming. He never relaxed until he saw the startled look fade from her eyes and her full red lips show the ghost of a smile.

"He most certainly is!" she said. "We are on our way to—to Gonzales. And it is getting late. Come, Andrew."

Andrew came. He was up in the ox-cart beside her, spry as any squirrel from the Brazos bottoms. Then, with departure imminent, the full force of his late indignities struck him. His dark eyes, staring down at the huge figure in the colorful uniform, held the bright and wicked shine of a naked blade. He spoke now without the slightest drawl.

"I trust, sir, we shall meet again. I shall look forward to that meeting with the keenest anticipation."

"The pleasure," Sam retorted, "will be all mine, suh. And thank yo' stars for a wife both brave and comely!"

"Get along, Blue; you, Bess!" Suzanna cried; and the ox-cart rolled away, leaving General Sam with Miss Anna's eyes sharp upon him.

"Handsome," Suzanna was thinking. "I wonder, now, if he'd be a good provider."

CHAPTER TWO

The Road to Gonzales

THERE was trouble at Gonzales over a cannon, spiked and practically worthless, with a touch-hole a man could fit his thumb into. The cry grew louder. War!

Drew Calhoun and Suzanna Shelby,

creaking slowly southward in the ox-cart, knew nothing of this. Drew's aristocratic pride had been cut to the quick; and because the girl beside him had witnessed his humiliation, he could not feel over-grateful to her. He began to wonder, in fact, how he could leave her gracefully. Then he began to wonder what he would do without her—and her ox-cart.

He had no horse. He had no money. Damned if he wasn't in a fix! From Galveston, where the coast steamer had landed him, he had dispatched an urgent letter to the colonel telling him of the shooting scrape and imploring him, in the name of heaven, to send money by the next boat. He had waited in Galveston for four miserable weeks. Then a letter had come.

Texas might make a man of you. Callouses and honest sweat never hurt anybody. You are on your own, my lad. I shall not send you a copper. Hoping that the next time I see you finds you much changed, I remain....

Drew's answer to that had been childish, he admitted. But what was a man to do? Hoe cotton?

Heading for Gonzales, on the frontier. Trouble with Mexico most imminent, and there's where it is sure to strike. Decided to pit my lot with the Texans. If you never see me again....

Great God! Had he written that? Yes, boy, you wrote it. And that's where you're going. To Gonzales. In an ox-cart.

The girl beside him said, "My! You look so grim. Get along there, Blue, plague you!"

"What's your name?" Drew asked, and the cart jolted, and he noted with embarrassment that her feet were bare as the day she was born.

"Suzanna," she told him. "Suzanna Shelby. Except that I forgot."

"Forgot what?"

"Why, it's Mrs. Calhoun, now. Mrs. Andrew Calhoun IV, isn't that what you told the man who was . . . using the sword?"

Drew felt his face warming. He growled hastily, "Forget that! Are you really going to Gonzales?"

"Nothing's going to stop me," she assured him. "The Shelbys gen'rally get to wherever they start for. That's where my brother Rip is. I'm glad to have you with me. It's sort of a comfort."

A comfort, Drew declared, that she wouldn't enjoy for long. And surveying the cart's modest contents, a small trunk, the shotgun, a sack of side meat and cornbread, he asked, "What are you doing here, anyway, all by yourself?"

She told him about starting out from Carolina with the Allens. At the Mississippi, two of the Allen children had come down with a cholera. She just had a tetch herself. And while they were stopped there some folks leaving Texas had camped with them, told them that Santa Anna was raising a vast army and that the colonists were sure to be wiped out. The Allens had decided to turn back.

"That was when my shoes played out, footin' it from the Mississip' to the Red," said Suzanna. "Was plain lucky to meet up with some good folks on their way to Nacogdoches. Had two ox-carts, but when we re'ched the Sabine it was floodin'. Poor Mr. Goodin and his wife went down with their cart, and heah I am with the other'n." Sadly she shook her head. "But I'm a-goin' to Gonzales!"

They stopped at a creek to water the oxen. Dark was coming on and a chill breeze rustled through the tall pines and made a lonesome sound.

"I reckon," Suzanna said, "it's cold cawnbread and cracklin's for us. Might as well we camp here. Stir yourself, man, and hobble the oxen. Bess and Blue are plumb wore out."

Drew returned from his chore to find her rummaging in the trunk. She came up with a pistol, powderhorn and shot pouch.

"Here. If any Injuns come noseyin' around, use 'em! They belonged to poor Mr. Goodin."

"You're not afraid to trust me with them?" Drew asked, feeling better now. "I might rob you. Take the cart and oxen while you're asleep, and—"

"I'll be a-sleepin' in the cart, with old Betsy right beside of me. I sleep like a cat, and old Betsy's loaded with buckshot. So think it over!"

She stared at him with her red-brown eyes suddenly sober. "I was funning, Drew. You wouldn't rob me. You wouldn't rob anyone. What brought *you* to Texas, since you asked me?"

"A personal matter," Drew said curtly. Then: "I reckon a girl did. I'll never in God's world trust another one. She dumped me overboard for a man I thought was my best friend. I got drunk. I got in a card game. An argument came up and I shot a fellow. He happened to be the son of a prominent New Orleans merchant, so—here I am. Shabby as any tramp, flat broke, thrown out by the colonel and headed for Gonzales in an ox-cart."

THE gathering darkness hid the bitterness in his eyes, but she must have sensed it. She said gently, "You're in no worse shape than I am, Drew. You were raised a gentleman. You've probably had good things all your life. Rip and me, we never had anything. That's why we came to Texas. Here, a person willing to work and sweat out the hard times and maybe fight a little—Drew, he can make his own start. Like my old grandpa used to say, anything you don't work for isn't worth having. What do you figure on doin', Drew? You're not going to throw yourself to the dogs because of that girl?"

"Can a man go any further to the dogs? A self-respecting dog wouldn't live in Texas!"

Drew thought of snowy white sheets, of a soothing brandy julep and a bell-pull by his bed to summon a boy to bring it to him. Out of the misery and self-pity in his heart, he exclaimed, "I meant every word I said to Houston. Give it back to the Indians!"

"So that's why they were so mad at you! I wish I had known it. Drew," she said soberly, "I'd have helped Sam Houston swing that sword. Texas is good enough for you to hide in when New Orleans kicked you out. Well, it ought to be good enough for you to fight for. I'm going to sleep. There's just one blanket and I hope you catch cold!"

They spent the next night in the clapboarded cabin of Ma Varner. They had covered fifteen miles since sunup, with about two hundred and thirty more to go. Suzanna said they were making right good time. When Drew came back from tending the oxen he found the two women chatting like old acquaintances, plump Ma Varner with her hands in biscuit dough, her face beaming with pride.

"Real flour!" she said. "My man swapped his pelts for a barrel of it just before he went to the war. Mart and me has been together a powerful long time, and if those pesky Meskins kill him . . . But my man will come back. If he hadn't taken his old musket and went, I'd of been purely ashamed! You folks ain't been married long, I'll bet."

Drew said, "Why, we—"

"Only three months," Suzanna said, sighing. "And most of that on the way down from Ca'lina."

"Do tell. Now, ain't that nice! And headin' for Gonzales—right where the first fightin's apt to be. But," she said with a measuring glance, "yo' man looks some of a fighter, his ownse'f."

With Suzanna's eyes suddenly bright upon him, Drew felt himself warming uncomfortably. She said, "He ought to could fight for something worth it. He shot a man over a game of cards."

"Cards, now." Ma Varner shook her head. "Jimsey! You, Pete!" she shouted out the back door. "Ain't you got them pigs 'tended to yet? Supper's nigh ready."

Jimsey was seven, Pete twelve. Their eyes widened at sight of the biscuits. Jimsey helped himself to a couple, put them on his wooden platter and ducked his head.

". . . And Father we thank You for all the good things. For these two fine boys. For these two good young folks come to keep us comp'ny tonight. Bless my Mart and keep him and he'p him lick the Meskins. Amen."

Jimsey was out the door like a shot. Ma Varner passed the biscuits and Jimsey was back to grab a couple more.

"The young devil," Ma said, shaking her head. "Jimsey!"

That was the first time Drew Calhoun IV had laughed in two months—when he saw young Jimsey Varner come through the door with his little ox-cart. Jimsey was beaming. His cart had biscuit wheels!

The Varners' cabin was larger than most; it had two rooms. After supper they talked a while by the smoky light of a rag wick dipped in fat. Then Ma said she knew her visitors must be tired. As for herself, so starved for company, she could talk all night. She said, "You folks take the bedroom, now. Kids and me'll bed up here on the kitchen floor. You'll find the cornshuck mattress right comfortable. How's

that, Mr. Calhoun? Not by a jugful. With Tige and Bluch around, them oxen will be all right."

Drew Calhoun IV slept soundly that night, with a sack of shucks for a pillow and the split-log floor for a bed. The last thing he heard before he dropped off to sleep was Suzanna's soft, "Good night, Drew." It was, he thought, a right pleasant sound.

THEY went creaking on at dawn, a sack of Ma Varner's vittles in the cart bed behind them and the oxen pointing their heads a little west of south. They slept out again that night and the next, for along these miserable ruts they followed the stretches were long and lonely between cabins. Drew, as the weary miles unrolled behind them, marveled at Suzanna Shelby. She never seemed to weary, and was seldom in bad humor. Once Drew asked, "Those good things you mentioned, how do you intend getting them? What are your plans, Suzanna?"

She gave him a long, sober-eyed look. "I figure to find me a man, Drew. Then I'll help him work for the good things."

"I suppose," he teased, "you've already got one picked out, huh? Some strapping lad from your Carolina mountains."

"I've been figurin' on it," she said. "I'm not sure yet. He wouldn't have to be terribly handsome, but he's got to be willing to fight for what's his. And he's got to be a good provider."

"Suppose, since we're supposin', that he already had money? Didn't have to rustle?"

Her eyes came up again and what he saw there startled him. "We're not supposing, Drew. At least I'm not. I'm trying to make up my mind. I wouldn't care how much money you've got, providing it hasn't weakened you. I might love a weak man but I sure wouldn't live with him!"

"My God," Drew murmured. "Woman, let's change the subject."

They stopped one evening beside a clear, swift creek bordered by live oaks and pecans. September's dusk lay warm over the land. Drew, that afternoon, had bagged a couple of squirrels, and was roasting them now over oak-wood coals, while down at the creek Suzanna made splashing sounds. Drew imagined her frisking in the water like some wild wood creature, and the campfire's smoke and the aroma of browning squirrel were pleasant in his nostrils, and it came to him that this journey had not been so bad, after all. Ten more days would see them in Gonzales, and after that . . . Drew wondered if he would ever see Suzanna again.

He bent over the fire, trying to visualize her in the colonel's drawing room. He shook his head sadly. He would see her as far as Gonzales, to her destination, and then. . . .

Drew stiffened, for a moment not quite believing that he had heard Suzanna scream. Then he had grabbed up the pistol from the bed of the cart and was running, shouting her name.

He burst through underbrush and vine, and a big burly fellow released the struggling girl, turning and cursing and reaching for the pistol at his belt. The girl was gone, scurrying into the brush. Drew was too enraged for careful shooting. He simply shoved the pistol out before him and fired.

It was over as quickly as that, the man running across the shallow creek, leaving Calhoun the memory of a scarred and malevolent face covered by a stubble of red whiskers that contrasted sharply with green, ugly eyes. Drew heard hoofbeats start up across the creek. He saw Suzanna's few garments folded on the bank and the wrath that was still in him put a burr to his voice.

"Come out and put on your clothes. I'm not leaving you alone. I've got my back turned."

"Did—did you—"

"No. I missed the sorry son!"

Rustling sounds came to him and the girl said in a choky voice: "Drew! Drew, I never was so frightened in my whole life! I didn't see him until he g-grabbed—Oh, Drew, what if you hadn't been here?"

Because she was so upset he took her in his arms. He could feel her heart hammering violently and because she was so young and helpless, he said, "There, Suzanna. There, now." And he kissed her gently and her arms tightened around him and a sort of wildness came over him. A fire rose in him and he was kissing her with something more than gentleness and she was kissing him back. He shoved her from him almost roughly. Her eyes lifted to his, brown and startled.

Then she sighed. "Anyway, it's a com-

fort to have a man along," she murmured. "A man who's a fighter."

THEY rolled into Gonzales settlement, on the east bank of the Guadalupe at dusk. Yellow candle light filtered past the heavy window shutters; saddled horses, wagons and ox-carts stood before the clapboard buildings. A man in buckskins, carrying a long rifle, emerged from a cabin and strode hurriedly toward the river.

The signs were plain enough. An Indian raid was pending, or new trouble with Mexicans. Well, it was their land, Drew thought; let them have it. Suzanna, beside him, said, "Something's stirring."

A girl came toward them in a wagon, standing erect in the wagon box behind a pair of Spanish mules. She called, "The men are at George Davis's peach orchard. They're digging up the cannon!" and she went rattling on by.

"Goodness!" Suzanna said. Drew grunted. Here, he was thinking with a queer, sharp regret, was where he and Suzanna Shelby parted company.

He stopped the oxen before a building wherein sounded a great ringing of iron upon iron. Two men were inside, working beside a glowing forge. They were cutting up a heavy chain which lay across an anvil and were so absorbed that neither noticed the ox-cart or its passengers until Drew spoke.

"Could one of you gentlemen direct me to Rip Shelby's place?"

The hammering stopped. Through the open doorway two pairs of eyes studied the tall stranger and the girl beside him in the ox-cart. Then one head turned and there was a sizzling sound as brown tobacco juice sprayed the forge.

"Up-river, 'bout ten mile. You'll find a dugout, but that ain't the place. That's the ole place. Rip's new place, now, it sets a mite t'other side. But Rip he won't be there. Nup, you won't find young Rip, 'cause we done sent him down to'rds Goliad to fetch all the folks in to Gonzales. Mighty good boy, young Rip, mightly good boy."

He gave the forge another drenching, fixed Drew with a keen eye.

"You'll pahdon me, suh, but you've got the look of a fighteh, yo' own-se'f. Come mawnin', we are sho'ly a-goin' to have a fight. Jus' soon's the boys git the cannon dug up, and me and Jawn Sowell, hyar, git enough ball and chain shot pounded out to fill 'er up with."

The other man, Sowell, put in fiercely, "They give us that six-pounder to use ag'in' the Injuns, and now they've sent a hundred Meskin dragoons to take it back. We buried the cannon but we're diggin' 'er up. Aim to load her on wheels and chouse them dragoons clean back to Béjar. You see Johnny Moore. He's colonel of the Gonzales Rifles. We all got to pitch in, or Santa Anna'll take all our guns, ram that new constitution down our th'oats and run us clean outta the country. I tell yuh, suh, we all got to fight!"

"I expect you're right, sir," Drew agreed politely, wondering what to do with the girl and beginning to wish he had quit her before they got to Gonzales.

He asked, "You want to go on up the river? To your brother's place?"

"When there's going to be a fight? When Rip is likely to be in it? I should say not! Drew, you could help. You could use the shotgun."

"I've got no quarrel with the Mexicans, no reason to fight for Texas," Drew said sourly. "If you want me to take you to your brother's, I'll take you. If not—"

Anger burned the hurt from her eyes and she said low and fiercely, "I wouldn't let you take me to—to Kingdom Come! Drew Calhoun, if you'll just get out of my ox-cart, I'll be obliged and rid of you!"

"And a good riddance, too," John Sowell growled. "Excusin' me, ma'am, but I thought he was your husband."

Drew jumped down and scowled at the big blacksmith. "One more question, my man, and I'm done with you. Where might a person inquire about his mail in this God-forsaken wilderness?"

Sowell jerked a grimy thumb. "Yonder, my good man—three houses down. I wouldn't begrudge any man his mail, hard as it is to come by. Even a high-nosed snob who thinks he's too good to fight."

Sowell's companion added, "Or a goddel-mighty Meskin-lover who hasn't got the belly for a fight! Beggin' yo' pardon, ma'am."

Suzanna called, "Drew, I— Wait, Drew!" But Drew Calhoun IV walked away without a backward glance.

CHAPTER THREE

"Shall Never Surrender . . ."

THE men came from the peach orchard, bringing the cannon. Chisholm and Sowell, the blacksmiths, set about mounting it on clumsy wooden wheels, and while this work was in progress a dozen or more women appeared, bearing a flag they had made. The women were very fierce. The flag, Drew thought, returning glum-faced after his fruitless quest for mail, was a little ridiculous, with its five-pointed star, its cannon and its challenge to "Come and Take It."

A horse, now, if he only had a horse. Plainly, there would be no sleeping here tonight. The sight of Suzanna, moving toward him, brought relief. In the gathering dusk he watched her eyes light up, then go smoky.

He said, "Suzanna, I couldn't leave you this way among strangers. We'll camp out tonight, and in the morning I'll take you on to your brother's place."

She pointed to a man in buckskins. "There's Colonel Moore. He can use any man who can shoot a gun."

The Texans were watching them now, and something in Suzanna's eyes—as if she were adding him up and finding him something short of a man—struck against Drew's pride and brought a spark.

"Thank you for your kindness," he said sardonically. "When I want the gallant colonel, I'll know exactly where to find him." Lifting his battered hat to her, he started to turn away.

A growling voice exclaimed, "That's him! That's the man! They told me about him just before I left Nacogdoches. Cussed Texas, he did, and Sam Houston whupped him with the flat of his sword. Stand back, boys. By gunnies, I aim to give him another whuppin'!"

The man swung from the saddle of a brown horse. He handed the reins to a bystander and advanced upon Drew with clenched fists. He hadn't shaved since the last time Drew had set eyes on him. His stubble of red whiskers had grown into a beard that almost hid a slanting scar. His green eyes held an eager and malicious glitter.

A man shouted, "Give it to him, Beau! We don't want his kind! Break his back!" While others began shouting, Beau lowered his head and rushed.

Drew did his best. For the first time in his life he had worked and sweated a little. He was wolf-lean, his muscles tough as rawhide. But the red-bearded Texan outweighed him by thirty pounds. Calhoun never had a chance. He stepped aside from that first rush, drove a fist against Beau's ribs. It was like slugging the ribs of an ox. Beau grunted and was around, swinging as he turned. The blow caught the side of Drew's head; it started bells ringing in his ears, and he staggered sideways. He crashed against the side of Suzanna's ox-cart. The taut-faced group reeled around him and he put both palms flat against the cart's wooden wheel and shoved. He was stalking forward, his eyes on that grinning red-bearded face, his legs like rubber beneath him, when something came out of the sky and hit his head one terrible, smashing blow.

Dimly he heard Suzanna scream. Big Beau seemed to rise straight up in the air; for Drew was falling. One moment, then Beau loomed above him, big as a mountain. The next, the sound of thunder was in Drew's ears and Beau was not there any more. The earth rocked gently beneath Drew and then became still. . . .

Drew slowly became aware of a familiar, creaking sound. The creaking stopped and presently he hard a single weird whistling shriek, such as a fierce wind gust might make driving through trees. Something slamed like a heavy door and then there were shrill, wild yells.

"Give it to 'em boys!" a familiar voice cried. "Chase 'em clear back to San Antone!"

"What was it?" Drew asked drousily. "A cyclone?"

"That was the Flying Artillery. That was all the iron slugs and chain shot stuffed in that cannon. You ought to see them. They've got pole lances they cut in the river bottom, gourd canteens, Kentucky rifles and Bowie knives! Johnny Moore's boys, across the river yonder, have got the dragoons on the run! They—Drew! You're awake!"

Drew opened his eyes. Through a thin gray fog he saw the familiar sides of an ox-cart, the straight, slim body of Suzanna Shelby. He murmured, "Suzanna, what—

how—" His head was going around in circles.

"Beau's pardner laid your head open with a wagon spoke. Beau was fixing to stomp you when I gave him a taste of buckshot. The cowardly bully! It's a pity I never hit him dead center, instead of wingin' him!"

"Suzanna, where are you taking me?"

"To Rip's place. I—had a little trouble with those Texans. They were pretty mad. I told them you were my husband and had suffered a touch of fever. That you were plumb willing to fight when you got able. Drew, how do you feel? Does your head hurt much? I disinfected it with whiskey, then used some bear-grease salve. I know it aches!"

"I feel fine," Drew said. "I feel wonderful." He even chuckled. "I'd like to have seen Colonel Moore's army!"

"You'll likely get a chance to!" she snapped. "Those men are about ready to ride you out of Texas on a rail!"

RIP SHELBY'S place was a one-room cabin surrounded by girdled live oaks. In the way of livestock there was a razor-backed hog, fond of rooting around inside the cabin, two potlikker hounds that delighted in chasing rabbits and baying at the moon, and a spavined, sway-backed mule with a wicked disposition and rolling eyes. Young Rip came riding up on the mule the following afternoon.

Rip was a sturdy lad with eyes the blue of Texas bluebonnets and a chin that could be stubborn. The love of adventure sang like wine in his veins, but deeper than this recklessness, a solid core to his being, lay a love for this Texas land and a faith in its future. Such was Drew Calhoun's opinion after studying the boy and listening to him talk. Rip Shelby, he reckoned, was perhaps a fair example of the type of young fellows now surging into Texas, brought by the promise of bounty land and bright glory, their hearts fired by the stirring words of Houston.

It never entered Drew's head that, between Drew Calhoun, the rich man's son, and Rip Shelby from the mountains of Carolina, there was somewhat of a contrast. Drew lay on the wall bunk. He heard Rip describe how the Mexicans had run. He heard Rip tell how the Texans were going on to San Antonio, to the Rio Grande and perhaps farther, driving the Mexicans before them. Young Rip's eyes flashed. Drew could hardly keep from smiling.

Rip could not stand hitched in one spot. In Gonzales, a real Texas army was forming. Steve Austin was expected any day, and there was talk that Houston would soon arrive. There was a fighting man! Fellow could follow old Sam through hell and back and never get his britches scorched! Adios, sis. Going to Gonzales to join the army. . . .

"Sis, there's one thing. You and Calhoun—you honest to God married?"

"We will be, Rip."

"Then you-all have an alcalde fix up a bond. That's good enough in Texas, if two folks love each other. You can get church married soon as Padre Muldoon comes around. Calhoun better treat you right, sis. He better! From what I heard about him in Gonzales—"

"He'll treat me right, Rip."

"Well, he better! But a man who won't fight for Texas . . . well, g'by, sis. See you when we lick the Meskins!"

"Take care of yourself, Rip," Suzanna said huskily. "You're the only brother I got. God bless you."

There came the creak of saddle leather and the plodding sounds of the sway-backed mule going away.

Drew, on the split-log bunk, heard Suzanna's brisk footsteps coming and shut his eyes so that she would think him still asleep. A man needed time to think things over!

* * *

"WHO WILL go into San Antonio with old Ben Milam?" And three hundred Texans followed old Ben and took Béxar by storm.

"The war is over! The Mexicans are licked!"

But gallant Ben never heard the glad cries. Ben Milam, most handsome of Texas men, lay where he had fallen, with a rifle ball through his brain, in the courtyard of the Veramendi house.

Sam Houston heard the foolhardy ones, though; and old Sam, newly elected Commander-in-Chief of the Texas "Armies," grimly shook his head. Houston, the old Regular, did not believe that such a ragtag bunch as Ben Milam had led could win

a final victory for Texas. He believed in formal drill and strict discipline. He thought the Indians could help. From New Orleans he ordered a thousand butcher knives, as many tomahawks, well-tempered, some Kentucky chewing tobacco. Mexican pride, Sam Houston knew, would demand swift vengeance for the defeat at Béxar.

Few people in Texas agreed with Houston. Yet already, from west and south, the armies of Santa Anna were marching, while to north and east were two thousand Indians who had their own grudges against Texas.

General Houston put aside his new uniform with the sword sash. He donned his old buckskins that smelled of many campfires and went to see Chief Bowl, war lord of the Cherokees, where around the council fire he would plead the cause of Texas and compliment the flavor of the dog-meat stew.

The last prop was ready. The stage was set. To Washington-on-the-Brazos, February 28th, came a courier on a hard-ridden horse, bearing a message from William Barret Travis, Commander of the Alamo,

To the People of Texas & all Americans in the world:

. . . besieged by a thousand or more Mexicans under Santa Anna. I have sustained a continual Bombardment & cannonade for 24 hours . . . The enemy has demanded a surrender at discretion, otherwise the garrison are to be put to the sword . . . I have answered the demand with a cannon shot & our flag still waves proudly from the wall. I shall never surrender or retreat. *Then I call on you in the name of Liberty, of patriotism & everything dear to the American character, to come to our aid. . . . Victory or Death.*

In this hour of need the eyes of Texas turned toward her man of destiny. Where was Houston? Outside the fireless shed called Convention Hall in the muddy stump-studded street, a shout started up. Sam Houston, come riding through the raw rain in time to put his bold autograph on Texas' Declaration of Independence. Worse tidings arrived from the Alamo. The enemy increasing; Texas ammunition was limited. With his faithful aide, Hockley, and three volunteers, the hope of the Republic rode from Washington-on-the-Brazos to meet Santa Anna and an army of seven thousand men.

A short distance from town, Sam Houston dismounted and placed his ear against the wet prairie ground. The ground failed to tremble. The firing had ceased. The Alamo, he feared, had fallen.

They rode hurriedly on toward Gonzales, reaching the settlement at four o'clock on the afternoon of March 11th.

DREW CALHOUN and Suzanna, behind plodding Blue and Bess, reached Gonzales that same afternoon. They found a letter waiting, a letter to "dere sis & husban."

i am goeing to ketch Al martin & men on way to Alamo. Jim bowie & Travis need help. Al has 31 men with him & think when i ketch him we can lik the meskins. drew in case anything hapens be good to sis & look after her & i leave her in yure care! i love her so much & want her to no. but nothing will happen am sure. in a hurrie! rip.

That letter from Rip was several days old. The letter the good storekeeper's wife handed Drew had been enroute for two months.

The woman said gravely, "God be with them; they're trapped in the Alamo, and my man with the rest. Sam Houston just rode into town. He's down yonder at the bend of the river, where Mose Baker's tryin' to drill a few boys. It looks bad, mighty bad. Son"—she fixed Drew with a keen eye—"why ain't you readyin' to fight?"

Drew glanced up from his letter. He said, "Ah—what?" and went back to his reading. Something was beginning to throb inside him. The letter was from the colonel.

"Why ain't you fightin', or fixin' to?" the old woman demanded again in a sharper tone. "Every Texas man has got to fight!"

"He's been sick," Suzanna explained quickly.

Drew caught her arm and started her toward the door. "Suzanna!" There was urgency in his voice. "I'm not going to stay here and lose my good blood for nothing. I'm taking you out of this savage, sorry place. Suzanna, you *are* going with me. To New Orleans!"

He was clutching both her arms now, searching her face almost desperately. In his mind, like wild running horses, flashed memories of a lot of things. Suzanna and her ox-cart saving the remnants of his pride in Nacogdoches. Suzanna defending him with her quick tongue and shotgun.

Suzanna tending his hurts, taking him to her brother's place. And the time he had kissed her! God, it would be good to be home again, to be back in New Orleans. Drew almost groaned the words. "Suzanna, I've been an awful fool. I love you, Suzanna, and I'll never let you go."

"*Drew!*" Her eyes filled with tears. They were the most wonderful eyes he had ever seen. Then she pulled away from him and shook her head.

"I love you, Drew, so much it hurts inside me. I guess I don't blame you for going back to all the good things, the easy things. But I won't go with you. If anything happens to Rip, I'll manage to get along. I won't ever forget you, Drew, but I'll find some other man. A man willing to fight for something besides himself, and who's a good—a good—"

She turned and ran back inside the store, sobbing. As Drew started to follow, from up the rutty street came a thin, anguished cry. Folks ran toward the sound, Drew among them. The wailing of those grief-stricken women was unforgettable.

Two Mexicans had arrived with a ghastly story. They told of a gray dawn, with Santa Anna's bands striking up the *Deguello,* the assassin's song. The battalions of Aldama and San Luis, of Toluca and Matamoras and Jimenes, with scaling ladders, fascines and axes, swarming over the walls thousands strong, to slaughter a feeble garrison of a hundred-and-eighty men. A black flag flew from a Mexican steeple. Travis fell across the carriage of his gun, Davy Crockett near the chapel and Jim Bowie died in his bed—with a trail of dead Mexican dragoons marking the way to the door. The bodies of the slain Texans, the two Mexicans claimed, were stacked up and burned on the bloody ground where they had fallen. No gringo had escaped, and Santa Anna, with upward of seven thousand men, was marching on Gonzales. . . .

"It's all a pack of lies! Captain Baker, arrest those two rascals who are trying to stampede us. They are Santa Anna's men."

A commanding figure in Cherokee coat and vest of buckskin, with sword and pistol weighting his belt and silver spurs jingling, Sam Houston strode forward and clamped the largest Mexican's shoulder with a grip of steel. He gave the unfortunate man a shove, then stood there staring at him.

"Captain De Sangue," Houston said, putting his flashing eyes on an officer in the crowd, "I want you to take a dispatch to Colonel Fannin, at Fort Defiance. I am sending Fannin, with all his men and artillery, to the support of those men in the Alamo. We will catch Santa Anna between two fires. Let me have one volunteer to go along with Captain De Sangue, and the fastest two horses in town!"

The womenfolk, thirty of them wives of men who had gone with Albert Martin to the Alamo, quited somewhat; for old Sam, standing there, was the picture of confidence. But the memory of the two Mexicans' story still lay like a horrible shadow across their minds. While the Texas men hesitated, Drew Calhoun stepped forward. To Goliad, he was thinking, a distance of sixty miles. There should be no danger, and he'd be furnished a horse to ride—to Fort Defiance and then to the coast, where perhaps he could catch a boat and leave this miserable land behind him. . . . Suzanna, he saw, was watching him with grief-darkened eyes.

"I'll go with Captain De Sangue," he said quietly.

Then everyone was watching him, Sam Houston's craggy face scowling a little.

"You, Calhoun," he said. "Unless you have experienced a powerful change of heart, I am afraid, suh—"

"Don't send him, General!" a voice cried. "He hasn't changed. He won't ever change. He's selfish, through and through. He's a rich man's son, and too good to work and fight. Fightin's for poor brave boys like my brother Rip!"

"But, ma'am. If he wants to carry my dispatch—"

"He won't," Suzanna declared. "I know him. I've lied for him, tried to believe in him. All he wants is a horse so he can ride out of here!"

"She's hysterical, General," Drew said stiffly. "I give you my word, as a gentleman and a Calhoun, I'll do my best to see your dispatch delivered. And no Calhoun ever went back on his word, yet."

"Yo' father wouldn't," Sam Houston said, "Colonel Calhoun—a mere captain, then—fought with me under General Jackson, with the Army of West Tennessee. . . .

Drew Calhoun and Captain De Sangue headed south on fast horses. Suzanna was nowhere to be seen; Drew doubted if he would ever see her again. The ox-cart, with Blue and Bess hitched to it, stood deserted before the store; and somehow that sight brough the bitterest thoughts of all. Drew drove his horse ahead with savage spurs.

CHAPTER FOUR

"In Compliance with Orders . . ."

THE plan, as De Sangue outlined it to Drew, had been a grand one. Following the fall of Béxar before Ben Milam's ragged men, a bunch of the more adventurous Texans had marched southward, with James Fannin one of the leaders. To the victor belongs the spoils—the silver and gold and dusky-eyed women of Matamoras! Sam Houston claimed that Fannin and company had stolen his army. He rode posthaste to get it back again.

"He talked most of 'em out of their plunderin' trip," De Sangue said. "Old Sam can talk when he wants to. Take the way he soft-talked those folks back yonder, in Gonzales."

"Soft-talked them? I don't understand."

"Man! Do you mean he fooled you, too? Why, General Houston has already sent one courier to Fannin. Sent orders from Washington-on-the-Brazos for Fannin to meet him in Gonzales. And that bluff about ordering Fannin and his artillery to go to the support of the Alamo—you know what this dispatch says? I'm carrying orders for Fannin to blow up Fort Defiance and then retreat to Victoria!"

"Then, that means—"

"It means, son," De Sangue said gravely, "that Houston was trying to prevent a panic. He believed every word those Mexicans said. The Alamo has fallen."

It hit Drew like a physical blow, sickening him. Young Rip, with his fierce loyalties, his impish smile; Travis, Crockett, Bowie and the others—butchered, gone. No wonder Suzanna had been bitter. No wonder she hated and despised him. She had seen through Houston's sham that necessity had imposed. Doubtless she thought that he, Drew Calhoun, had seen through it, too. God, what must she be thinking.

Drew reined up, said, "De Sangue, I'm going back. I've got to go back! You don't need me!"

"I'm sorry, Calhoun, but we might run into a Mexican scout party. Together, there's a chance one of us would get through. These orders have to reach Fannin! I'm sorry, but I'll have to hold you to the promise you gave General Houston."

They rode on. . . .

* * *

Colonel J. W. Fannin, Jr., to a friend in Brazoria, wrote from Fort Defiance:

The enemy have the town of Béxar, with a large force. . . . Another force is near me, and crossed the Nueces yesterday morning. . . . I have about four hundred and twenty men here, and if I can get provisions in . . . will never give up the ship whilst there is a pea in the dish. If I am whipped, it will be well done, and you may never expect to see me. . . . But I must play a bold game; I will go whole hog. If I am lost . . . may my wife and children, and children's children, curse the sluggards forever. I am too mad . . . to do anything but fight. . . .

But Fannin was a West Point man, out of patience with the raw Texas sluggards. Young Lieutenant Brooks, Fannin's aide-de-camp, wrote to his father in Georgia from a different point of view.

We will march at dawn with 320 men, and 4 pieces of artillery—2 sixes and 2 fours. We have no provisions scarcely, and many of us are naked and entirely destitute of shoes. But something must be done to relieve our Country. . . . We will do our best, and if we perish, Texas and our friends will remember that we have done our duty. . . . If I should be unfortunate enough to fall, my services here will entitle me to 1800 or more acres of land. . . . Excuse this hasty scrawl. . . . Give my love to. . . .

Both Colonel Fannin and young Lieutenant Brooks were soon to die, while Drew Calhoun. . . .

Drew rode from Fort Defiance with Fannin's men on the morning of March 19th, under cover of a soupy fog. It was Drew's thought to go with Fannin to Victoria on the Guadalupe and from there on back to Gonzales. For some reason, which he hadn't stopped to analyze, New Orleans —and all the good things—had faded to a dim memory in his mind. He thought about young Rip. He thought about Suzanna.

He was still thinking about her when, a few miles from the Coleta, an ammunition cart broke down. It was an hour before the little column moved on, and still no Mexican troops were in sight. Spirits began to rise. A dark line of woods, bordering the Coleta, loomed ahead. And here, against the advice of his officers, with shelter and water both close at hand, Fannin made his fatal mistake. He called a halt.

It was here, on the bald prairie, that the enemy caught them. The oxen had grazed a bit. The men had rested. The little army was preparing to resume the march. Some sharp-eyed fellow shouted, "Here comes the Mexicans!" And they were coming—two long columns of them, emerging from the timber to the left and from behind the Texans. A slight depression in the prairie offered the only cover, and here Fannin formed his men in a hollow square, three ranks deep, oxen and carts in the middle.

The Red Rovers and the New Orleans Grays were placed facing the nearest Mexican troops, with cannon at each corner of the square. Mexican trumpets blared. Guidons whipped in the breeze as the Mexican cavalry came on, dividing and hitting from three directions, with Fannin coolly calling his men to hold their fire. The Mexicans were within three hundred yards when the Texas cannons cut loose with grape and canister, and still the enemy came on. Long rifles and *escopetas* began popping. Texas bayonets tasted blood. Men on both sides dropped like leaves from a storm-blasted tree.

A MAN beside Drew, in the third row, let drive at a charging cavalryman with a load of blue whistlers. The Texan started a wild yell that broke off in a groan. Drew dropped to a knee beside him and with a bit of cloth from his shirt-tail, wiped blood from the graying lips. The man, shot through the chest, murmured, "Tell Pete . . . he's a man now. Tell Jimsey . . . and mother. . . ." A shudder. A tired sigh.

Drew rose with Mart Varner's old *escopeta* tight-grasped, his jaw set so that muscles stood out. Jimsey and a toy cart with biscuit wheels. "Bless my Mart and keep him and he'p him lick the Meskins." Ah, it was all unfair! It was foolish, a handful of Texans fighting two thousand Mexicans. Texas wasn't worth fighting for, anyway. But it wasn't fair, damn it all!

The Mexican cavalry was making another charge. Rifles and bayonets now. No water to sponge the cannons with, and damned little powder! Give 'em hell!

The Tampico regiment of infantry took pot-shots from the tall grass. Dusk came on, and the Campeachy Indians crawled through the grass to within thirty yards of the Texan line. Brave Fannin, the foolish one, took a slug through the thigh. Young Lieutenant Brooks lay with the life running out of him. Darkness closed in.

Drew Calhoun marveled at the courage, the determination of these men. He saw one lad named Ripley, with his thigh broken, propped up in a cart, still using his rifle. He couldn't understand it; for Harry Ripley, like himself, was from Louisiana. Young Harry's father, General Ripley, was a friend of the colonel's. These Texas men, most of them had homes and families to think about. But what was Harry Ripley fighting for? Captain De Sangue tried to explain it to Drew.

"Why," the captain asked, "did the colonists fight so bitterly in the Rebellion? For their lives? For their homes? Yes, in a smaller sense. But actually, Calhoun, people fight for ideals, for principles."

Drew watched De Sangue drive a Bowie knife blade into the stubborn earth. It struck him that trying to dig an entrenchment with that pitiful sliver of steel was about as foolish as a handful of ragged, hungry, half-armed men trying to whip the Mexican army.

"Hog-wash!" he said.

De Sangue kept digging. Yonder, men were dragging dead horses and oxen and carts, forming a breastwork. Occasionally a rifle cracked, and in between these sounds the wounded and the dying called for water and babbled in delirium.

"Calhoun, you can't see," De Sangue said wearily. "Your ancestors came to a land as poor and savage as this. They came in search of liberty and happiness. They were willing to fight for their ideals, and because they did, Calhoun, you never worked or fought, either! Those things were done for you. And right now you'd give your right arm to be back in New Orleans, enjoying the luxuries that never cost you a drop of sweat or a speck of blood. Suppose you were on your own, had no

rich father; that Texas offered the only chance in the world for you ever to have anything? Then, my young friend, you'd see things in a different light!"

"I'd shoot myself," Drew said.

De Sangue ducked as a rifle ball bounced off a cartwheel and went whining away into the night. He spoke with a sardonic humor.

"Save your powder, son. The Mexicans will do that for you."

The night wore on. Dawn broke chill and gray over the dead oxen and horses, over the quick and the dead and the dying men. "Oh, God! Oh, thank God!" the yell arose. "Reinforcements!" Some wounded even raised their heads. Out yonder in the foggy dawn, men were moving. Out yonder voices lifted in glad shouts. Reinforcements surely had arrived . . . for the Mexicans.

The Mexican general, Urrea, paraded his forces in four columns. The rising sun struck bright gleams from the two brass nine-pounders which had come with the Mexican reinforcements at dawn. The nine-pounders opened fire at five hundred yards. The Texans, with two rounds left, saved their powder. The sun's heat rose to an intolerable peak. The suffering of the wounded increased.

Colonel Fannin, himself, hobbled out on his wounded leg to talk surrender, with the warning of his friend, Captain Shackleford, to remind him of what the Texans expected: "Secure an honorable capitulation, Jim, else come on back. Our graves are already dug. We'll all be buried together."

Fannin surrendered for himself and men "as prisoners of war, according to the usages of the most civilized nations." The prisoners were taken back to Goliad. . . .

From Antonio Lopez de Santa Anna to General Urrea, Commander, &c.:

In respect to the prisoners . . . it is decreed that foreigners invading the republic, and taken with arms in their hands, shall be judged and treated as pirates. . . .

From the commandant at Goliad to General Urrea:

In compliance with definite orders from his Excellency, the general-in-chief . . . at four o'clock tomorrow morning the prisoners sent by you to this fortress will be shot. . . .

The evening of the 26th passed pleasantly enough. Colonel Fannin entertained some friends. Some of the young men who had mastered the flute played *Home, Sweet Home.* Little attention was paid to the courier who dashed up on a lathered horse, seeking the commandant's quarters. Darkness dropped over the old Spanish mission, and in that darkness Drew Calhoun thought of a lot of things. He wondered what Suzanna was doing, and if he would ever see her again. He thought over things De Sangue had said, and the solemn, simple words from America's most mighty document ran through his head.

. . . We hold these truths to be self-evident, that all men are created equal, that they are endowed by the Creator with certain inalienable rights, that among these are Life, Liberty and the pursuit of Happiness. . . .

Life, Drew thought, he still held onto. But where was his liberty, his happiness? What made happiness, anyway? The possession of wealth? No, he was begining to doubt that. And short days ago, when he had been a free man, he had not been happy. So perhaps the secret of being happy

... ITS QUALITY
HITS THE SPOT!

lay in the pursuit of happiness. But how did a man go about it? Drew dropped off to sleep feeling that the answer was close around him, an elusive butterfly thing that some day he would reach out and grab. . . .

An officer came before dawn to wake the prisoners. He brought good news. They were to be liberated, he said, on parole. Arrangements had been made to send them to New Orleans on boats waiting at Copano.

New Orleans! Home! Drew's heart gave a mighty leap, then dropped and lay like a dead thing in his chest. New Orleans without Suzanna—no, not for him.

Outside the church the prisoners were formed into three columns, then marched from the fort under heavy guard. Some Mexican women at the gate murmured, *"Pobrecitos, pobrecitos,"* and one of them turned her face away. Strange, Drew thought, that they looked so sad. And why were the prisoners being taken in different directions if they were all going to Copano? Drew wasn't much worried. He simply couldn't understand it.

GUARDS in double files marched on each side of Drew's column. About half a mile out, on the San Antonio Road, a halt was called. The guards on the side next to the river filed around to the opposite side. From the directions the other two columns had taken came crashes of gunfire. A lad next to Drew yelled, "Boys, they are going to shoot us!" and in the same instant Drew heard the clicking of musket locks along the Mexican line. The soldiers let loose a volley at the prisoners.

The prisoners were in a column of twos, Drew on the side nearest the river. Captain De Sangue, in front of him, fell backward against Drew, and the captain's dead body bore Drew to the ground.

In all this Drew was lucky. There was no time to think, no time for horror. A man acted by instinct, and with the Mexicans charging with ready bayonets, Drew's instinct was to hug the ground. The Mexicans charged over him, and then Drew got up and ran after them. For with bald prairie on three sides, his only chance to escape lay in reaching the dark timber that bordered the river, five hundred yards away.

So Drew left behind him the dead and the dying—all those butchered ones. He ran like a frightened rabbit, and even then, for him to escape, a Texas boy just as frightened as Drew was must pay with his life.

The Mexican soldiers, like hunting dogs after rabbits, were beating through the woods when Drew went crashing into the tangle of live oak and interlacing vine. He made quite a racket, and that was a mistake. A Mexican infantryman, turning toward the crackling sound, was waiting for him. He charged at Drew with his bayonet-tipped musket poised for the lunge that would send eight inches of cold steel clear through to Drew's backbone. Drew's legs turned to lead. He sucked air into burning lungs, tried to run, and stumbled. The Texas lad was trying desperately to reach the river. He ran squarely between Drew and that steel blade.

Drew heard a grunt; and that was when the blade plunged home. The boy went down with a queer, reproachful look on his face. The Mexican heaved back on his musket. Then he had to put his foot on the writhing lad.

Drew ran past the soldier while he struggled to free his bayonet. A minute later Drew reached the river, and though it was deep and swift at this point, he dived on in and struck out for the opposite bank. The current carried him down-river, while soldiers along the bank took pot-shots at him. He was so completely exhausted that he felt no fear. Sickness lay in his belly like something dead. He couldn't climb the steep bank when finally he reached it, so he hung onto a trailing wild grapevine and was violently ill.

Across the river he could hear the Mexican lancers shouting at one another, riding the brush in search of the handful of gringos who had survived the slaughter. His situation still was desperate. His best chance lay in hitting eastward toward the coast. It never entered his head to do so. Suzanna might still be in Gonzales, and if he had to crawl on his hands and knees, that was where he was going.

From the direction of Goliad he heard a thin, ragged volley of gunfire. That, he guessed, would be a firing squad murdering the wounded: Fannin, young Harry Ripley and a lot of others.

The feeling growing inside Calhoun was

a violent thing. It grew from numerous seeds: A kid with a cart that had biscuit wheels—and a father who would never come home; a young fellow named Rip who had gone to "ketch Al martin. . . . in a hurrie" to shed his blood at the Alamo; Captain De Sangue, with the ideals he had died for; Suzanna and the "good things" that she was ready to fight for. . . .

Those were some of the seeds; but what fruit they would bear, Drew didn't know. All he knew now was that he had to find Suzanna.

CHAPTER FIVE

Santa Anna Marches

"HOCKLEY, there is the last hope of Texas. We shall never see Fannin nor his men."

Commander-in-Chief Sam Houston's ragged band, which could not be called an army, was retreating from Gonzales—an ammunition wagon drawn by four oxen, a few horses, and perhaps six hundred men. Sam Houston made a show of counting them.

"We are the rise of eight hundred strong." His tremendous voice carried the length of the straggling column. "With a good position we can whip ten to one of the enemy."

Faithful Hockley might well have replied, "Sir, the future of Texas rests in your hands." Hockley alone might have kept such faith in old Sam. For the situation was desperate.

At San Patricio, some ninety men under Grant and Johnson had been killed or captured by Urrea, whose dragoons would soon cut Sam Houston's force of fighting men in half. The scout, Deaf Smith, had brought into camp Mrs. Dickinson, her fifteen-month-old daughter, and Travis' Negro servant, Joe—only survivors of the Alamo. While people of Gonzales grieved for lost loved ones, twenty men deserted and spread panic over the land. Santa Anna's advance guard was in sight across the Guadalupe. Santa Anna, the butcher, was coming with six thousand men to put Texas to the sword.

Women left dinners simmering on the stove. In ox-carts, in wagons and on foot the settlers abandoned their homes and struggled eastward. Wives called out their husbands' names, mothers searched for their children, when, at the Colorado, high water stopped them. This was the Runaway Scrape. These frightened folk were like rats trapped in a burning building. The mighty Colorado might have been the River Styx, separating the living from the the dead—and Sam Houston rode among them, assuring them that each civilian would be safely over the river before a single soldier crossed.

Texas' bright star was rising. The hour was at hand, and Texas' man of destiny would not fail his adopted land.

Houston sent a detachment back thirty miles to bring in a blind woman with six children—and then had to tell her that her husband had perished in the Alamo. He retreated to the Navidad, to the Colorado, to the Brazos. He wrote to the government, "If only three hundred men remain on this side of the Brazos, I will die with them or conquer." And the government at Washington-on-the-Brazos slapped together the Texas Constitution, then fled.

President Burnet wore a pistol beneath one tail of his coat, a Bible beneath the other; he kept a spy in Houston's camp.

Old Sam wrote, "For forty-eight hours I have not eaten an ounce, nor have I slept."

Deaf Smith captured a Mexican scout who reported that General Sesma was approaching with nearly a thousand men.

A refugee galloped into camp, shouting that Fannin and his men had been massacred. Cries arose for the Texans to attack. Houston had the refugee arrested. President Burnet's spy wrote, "The general has abandoned the use of whisky, is now using opium. . . ." Houston's order was: "Retreat!"

The little army was ready to rebel. Captain Moseley Baker told anyone who would listen—and there were many—"We need a new leader! We need a man who will fight!" Sam Houston drove the men through the mud and rain, writing from his saddle to the Secretary-of-War, "If I err, the blame is mine."

Drew Calhoun, the "refugee" placed under arrest by Sam Houston, hated Sam more than he had thought it possible ever to hate a man.

Near Goliad, he had found a sorry horse. He had ridden the beast bareback to Gonzales, only to find that settlement in

ashes. With a broad trail to follow, that of the Texas Army, the fleeing settlers, and the Mexicans who pursued them, he had ridden through what once had been Gonzales town, fear growing inside him. He had skirted General Sesma's army. He had reached Sam Houston's camp, on the Brazos, one evening at dusk, a ragged, half-starved, wild-eyed figure astride a sway-backed horse. But on that long and lonesome ride from Goliad, Calhoun had got a few things straight in his mind. He knew now that, without Suzanna, life for him would not be worth living. For Suzanna's sake, though the land was not worth it, he would fight for Texas. And he would take her home to New Orleans, to the "good things" that a man would never find in this, sorry, worthless land.

Houston was sunning himself on a pile of saddles. He looked up at this ragged, wild-eyed courier, cut himself another chew of tobacco and said, "Hockley, this is the man who said, 'Give Texas back to the Indians.' I doubt if my dispatch to Fannin was ever delivered. This man is a spy for Santa Anna. See that he doesn't leave camp."

THE rain came down, and President Burnet wrote, "Sir: The enemy are laughing you to scorn. You must fight." Sidney Sherman, that dashing young man, Captain Mosely Baker and others, called for volunteers to attack the Mexicans. Sam Houston had two graves dug, while about camp notices appeared:

THE FIRST MAN TO BEAT FOR VOLUNTEERS WILL BE SHOT!

Drew found Suzanna in the civilians' camp, using her ox-cart for a rain-break. He dropped to his knees before her and his whole heart must have shown in his eyes.

"Drew!" she said. *"Drew!"*

He reached for her, pulled her close against him and with her face against his chest she began sobbing.

"I thought you were dead, Drew!"

"No," Calhoun said. "Suzanna, the people are running. I've come to take you away from this place. Houston is a fool. Even Burnet and the government have run for it. Suzanna, we can reach the Sabine. The colonel has forgiven me. We won't stop till we reach New Orleans. Suzanna, I'll give you all the good things. I won't leave without you, but—"

"Then you'll stay here, Drew," she said. "I think Sam Houston will pull us through. Drew, if I deserted him now, Drew, I could never hold up my head."

"But it's so foolish, Suzanna! I'm not a coward, believe me. Your brother died in the Alamo. I saw four hundred of Fannin's men die. And for what? Suppose, by some far-fetched chance, Houston and his men should whip the Mexicans? Then what? A lot of good brave men would die. Houston would get his name up, and there'd be another star for Old Glory. That's not for us, Suzanna! I want us to live! I'm going to take you away from here!"

"No, Drew," she said. "I have faith in Sam Houston."

He argued with her. He pleaded. He cried out at last, in his blind misery, "Well, I'm going, then! 'Life, Liberty and the pursuit of Happiness. . . .' If you stay here, you'll lose all three of them! Good by, Suzanna. God bless you." He walked slowly away.

So it was that a thing as small as this, a rich man's son stumbling through the night, in search, actually, of an elusive goal called "Ideals," was to determine the future of Texas. Drew, himself, stopping beside the campfire of Moseley Baker's company, would have been the first to curl his lip at the suggestion that he was about to play so heroic a part.

Said Moseley Baker, "Men, we are at the crossroads. We either intercept Santa Anna at Harrisburg, or retreat to the Sabine and keep on going. Me, I'm tired of runnin'! I say let's go on to Harrisburg!"

Shouts rose in the dismal night. Campfires glowed dimly in the raw rain. A burly fellow named Beau, with a red beard and green eyes shouted words to strike the spark that could well have burned to ashes the hopes of Texas and of Sam Houston. Except for that lone, groping figure that came out of the darkness. . . .

"The hell with Sam Houston! That cowardly squawman won't stop runnin' till he reaches General Gaines' army, on the Sabine! Then it'll be too late to fight! Me, I'd ruther follow a man like Sid Sherman! All you that figger the same, rise up

and—" The man named Beau stopped suddenly.

Drew didn't stop to think. He simply shoved forward, and red-bearded Beau was before him, and he said, "Sir, you are a wind-bag and a coward! Sam Houston could whip you with his little finger, but since Sam is not here—"

Drew gathered himself and slugged Beau in the face. A lot of things were behind that blow: a kid with a cart with biscuit wheels; Captain De Sangue with his brave heart and his ideals; Suzanna, with her brother dead, who still had faith in Texas and in Sam Houston. Drew slugged big Beau and was amazed to see the man go backward and fall. Drew said, "For Rip and Fannin!" and the red beard was before his eyes, and he lashed out again.

Beau got up again. He knocked Drew flat. The fire burned Drew's ragged clothes, and he bounced up and hammered at Beau, saying something about "Liberty" and the "good things," and "God bless old Sam!"

Before it was over the Texas men were cheering for Drew because he was the under dog. Their grievances against Houston were forgotten. And when Drew drove burly Beau backward, and laughed, and knocked him sprawling across a wagon-tongue, the men raised a great shout.

"That," Drew said, "is for the pursuit of Happiness. Thank God I know how to go about it, now!"

The rest of it is history. How the men followed Houston on to Harrisburg; how at four o'clock in the afternoon they fell upon the enemy, while drum and fife played *Come to the Bower,* and the men yelled, "Remember the Alamo!" and "Remember Goliad!" and old Sam, on a white stallion, led the charge; how at length the Mexicans surrendered, and a Mexican woman camp-follower, expecting no mercy, begged of a Texas soldier, "Do not kill me! For the love of your mother, Señor Damn. . . ." All these things have been told, and of how Sam Houston fought with his ankle shattered and his boot full of blood, and how, later, the Texas men found Santa Anna sitting forlornly on a stump. . . .

But little mention has been made of how, when it was all over, Suzanna Shelby found Drew Calhoun, the rich man's son, with blood from a scalp wound trickling down his face, holding an ancient *escopeta* over his head like a club, and clamoring with the rest for the life of Santa Anna. Suzanna caught him by the arm. She had considerable trouble quieting him.

"The damned murderer," he said. "The bloody butcher. If it wasn't for old Sam, by God, I'd tear the son apart! I'd take his black heart and—Suzanna! Ah, Suzanna, I thought you'd gone on with the rest. I thought I'd have to hunt for you."

"And would you have hunted for me, Drew?"

"As long as there was breath in me. Before God, I never would have stopped!"

"Then it's up to you, Drew. I'll stay with you here. I'll go with you to New Orleans. I know you're a fighter. I know you'll look after me."

The glory that was in her eyes almost blinded him. He could not speak.

Sam Houston, sitting nearby beneath a tree, brought an ear of corn from beneath his blanket and began to nibble the kernels. A soldier picked one up and said he would take it home. Sam Houston began to scatter kernels, and when the men gathered the kernels he said, "Take this along with you to your own fields. Cultivate the arts of peace as you have shown yourselves masters of the art of war."

"We'll call it Houston corn!" the men shouted.

"No," old Sam said, "call it San Jacinto corn."

Drew stooped and picked up a grain. "The pursuit of Happiness," he said gravely. "Fighting not for yourself but for others. And working, Suzanna. Let's go home, sweetheart, and plant our San Jacinto corn."

THE END

THE BEST IN WESTERN FICTION!

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By WILLIAM R. COX

The table was rising then as Truxton kicked it over; Slavin's single shot was spoiled.

Tough Ed Slavin, poker boss of Tinted Basin, sneered at the dead man's hand of aces-and-eights; he wasn't scared of ghosts, God, man or the devil. But one day tough Ed sold chips to a gambler from the East, and three little ducks, backed by one gray bullet, settled that tinhorn's goose forever....

THE STAGECOACH toiled over the last of the hills and the afternoon sun glowed upon the cup-like depression in the rock. The road had been blasted by miners' powder and ran, curving gracefully, down to where the town stood, Willow Creek winding along its edge.

The lean-jawed man stared down at the town from the stage's box and the driver gestured with his whip. Exuding alcohol fumes, the driver said, "Thar she lays. Tinted Basin, as purty a lil ole town as ther

THE JOKER FROM KAYCEE

is west o' Kaycee. But rotten at the core."

The hills were all around, the town in the middle. To the ears of Del Truxton came the pounding of stamp mills. The rock had proved rich, then had petered out, then settled down to steady production. The story of gold in that country was the old one of the prospector, the small operator and finally the huge corporation taking over production. Meantime Tinted Basin, its colors reflected from the iridescent rock, squatted in the middle of it all.

To the south was cattle land; the cowmen came through South Pass on Saturdays and on paydays to mingle with the hob-nailed, flannel-shirted miners. Tinted Basin was noisy, then, and rough, and there was money rattling in its coffers. But on Sunday Parson Weevil preached in the church and old Gorse Grayson kept order.

All this Del Truxton had learned from the driver. The stage went down the hill now and Truxton eyed the terrain keenly, watching for landmarks, for side roads, for cover of any kind—in case of trouble. He was a man who did not seek trouble, but often found it.

The driver muttered, "They calls it Tainted Basin and ain't but one man give it the name. Thet dirty scoundrel Slavin owns every tainted thing in the town. He's the kind spreads his arms and the rotten things run into 'em. And he makes profits on 'em all."

Del Truxton nodded sympathetically and handed over his flask once more. The driver drank, braking the stagecoach and handling his reins at the same time, a considerable feat, involving use of the elbows. But he said sturdily, "I ain't man enough to fight him. But someone will, you mark my words. A man's got to be awful big to put the 'a' in Tinted Basin and make it stick!"

He said no more. The stage careened down a clean, bare main street and paused before the Ace of Hearts Hotel. Two drummers and a girl descended. Truxton slid his lean length from the box. The girl looked weary, and pretty in a worn way. She looked about, her bags at her side, disconsolate, expectant of nothing, Truxton thought.

A wide man of medium height detached himself from a group. He wore a revolver strapped to his thigh. He was dressed in city clothing and the holstered gun gave him the appearance of a peace officer, yet he wore no badge and beyond him Truxton saw the drooping pale mustaches of old Marshal Grayson.

The man said, "You Grace Bird?"

The girl drew in her breath, looking at him. Her little cry was barely audible. The fear was plain upon her. It stifled her voice, bore down upon her weariness, blanketing her.

"I am Ed Slavin." The man's voice was casual, steady, almost melodious. He had a face sharp as an axe, and a nose which jutted and hooked, dominating his face. As the girl made a motion as though to retreat, to seek escape, he murmured, "No use, my dear. No way out. You signed to work for me. Pretty good, huh? Grace Bird, working in The Gilded Cage."

Del Truxton stood quite still, listening. He saw the marshal, saw that old Grayson recognized him. He saw also two men in black coats, white shirts and string ties, obvious tinhorns. He saw a cattleman and a couple of other citizens, all earnestly paying no attention to Slavin and the girl, but all as obviously desperately interested.

He had spoken to the girl on the stage and been repelled by her listless indifference. Now his sympathy was with her, but he saw no excuse for interfering, nor did he have any particular desire to do so. He was, after all, a gambler. He was known as such to the old-timers like Gorse Grayson. He was in Tinted Basin for a definite reason. The girl did not enter into his plans.

HE WENT past Slavin and up the steps of the hotel. He saw the man's hard eyes swivel and examine him. He met the gaze coolly, then moved on to the desk.

He had registered when Marshal Grayson touched him on the elbow. The old man's mustaches were stained with tobacco juice, his faded blue eyes were worried. He said, "Del, it's nice seein' yuh. Hope yuh ain't stayin' long."

Truxton shook hands, smiling a little. "I'll be here a while. Mean to sit in that poker game you have here. Heard about it."

The marshal shook his head. "I was skeered o' that. Yuh can't git in that game, Del. It's sorta private."

The gambler drawled, "I know. I heard. I'll be in it."

Grayson said, "I'll come up and set with yuh, Del. Wanta palaver."

They climbed the stairs. The room overlooked Main Street and was directly above the wooden awning which covered the veranda. Truxton opened the window and stood with long legs apart, staring down the street to where the late sun shone upon a sign which said,

THE GILDED CAGE, ED. SLAVIN, PROP.
DRINKS AND GAMES FOR ALL

The saloon and gambling house was the largest building in town.

He saw Grace Bird trudging along, carrying her own bag. Slavin, a step ahead, led her to an outdoor stairway and gestured. She went up, a step at a time, lugging the bag. Slavin lit a cigar and watched her until she had entered a door and closed it behind her. Then the saloonkeeper swaggered into the bar. He had the air of a man who has won a battle.

Grayson said, "I'm an old man, Del. I remember when you started. I was on top then. I went downhill some, you know."

Truxton said, "But you're doing well here. Getting paid off by Slavin."

"He's tough, don't you forget it," Grayson said. "I'm tellin' yuh, Del. He's as tough as Masterson, or Thompson, or Earp or Hickok. I mean he's lightnin' fast with thet hawg-laig, too. He's kilt fourteen damn men."

"Damned men is right," said Truxton. "Booze artists, tinhorns, simple cowboys, Mexicans."

"He kilt Ray Atkins," said Grayson quietly. "I seen it."

Truxton said, "I know."

Atkins had been a good man, a fast man. Truxton wondered sometimes, a trifle wearily, if he did not go into situations like this purposely, because a man like Atkins got killed. He was not aware of accepting a challenge, but perhaps that was why he pushed forward always and met men like Slavin.

Grayson said, "If ye go agin him, Del, I'm on his side."

"Of course. You take his pay."

The old man flinched. "The town pays me. But he's the town. He owns it, body an' soul, if any. It was a right pert lil ole town 'til he come along and took it."

"I'm a gambler," said Truxton, as one would say that he was a doctor, or a lawyer, or an engineer. "I came here to get into this big poker game. As you know, I'm an honest gambler. All I ask is that you certify to this."

Grayson said, "Ain't a goin' to do it."

Truxton said softly, "You'll do it, Grayson." He kept his back turned to the old fighting man. There had been a day in Abilene, when Grayson was, in his own words, "downhill." Truxton had been helpful. Grayson would do his part. The marshal would do it unwillingly—he went out now without another word, shutting the door hard behind him—but he would come through. The code of the old west bound him tight. He might buck Truxton in a showdown, but he would testify to Truxton's integrity.

A window was raised above The Gilded Cage, a rag of curtain flapped into view, a pale face retreated from the gaze of the men in the street below. Truxton shrugged and turned away from his view of Main Street. It was a hard country on women and kids. Men like Slavin made towns like Tinted Basin hell-holes of iniquity. They also provided poker games for men like Truxton.

TRUXTON had arrived on Wednesday. He let Thursday and Friday slide by, merely marking time in The Gilded Cage, observing, buying a drink now and then for friendly disposed men, smiling a lot. He did not buck the faro bank nor the wheel; he did not offer to play monte. He marked himself by remaining aloof, yet genial.

The poker game went on nightly, at a round table beneath a glittering chandelier. The personnel changed, but the house man, Jorgen, was always in it, and most nights it was Axel Lundquist, the mine owner, a big Swede; and Jim Peal, a laconic rancher, owner of the Flying P, both rich men. Others came, lost their money in gobs, and left. Slavin, of course, was the winner.

Slavin played each night, for long or short periods. Truxton watched the man's merciless hammering against the weaker players in the game, the way he skillfully manipulated the deck. Yet there was no sign that Slavin cheated. In fact Truxton would have sworn that the man merely used

his knowledge of poker and his natural ruthlessness to win.

Lundquist and Peal were the sort who could not stay away from the table. Both big operators in their fields, they were poker-crazy. The West was lacking in varied forms of amusement, of course, and poker was the relaxation of its top men. These two typified the richer men who found more excitement in the flip of the pasteboards than in the pursuit of further riches.

Slavin, naturally, was milking them, taking a little at a time, but slowly undermining their morale and their fortunes.

The faro bank was as crooked as a dog's hind leg, Truxton saw. The wheel was worse. The ferret-faced men operating the games in The Gilded Cage were crooks of the first water.

But the poker game seemed honest. It was interesting. Each day Truxton drifted a little closer to the table, watching intently, and once he bought a drink for a crowd which included Peal and Lundquist and managed to exchange a pleasant word with them.

Friday night the girl appeared. She came in through the back entrance where the piano stood on a little platform. The professor played *Camptown Races* and she sang it in a lively if small voice.

She looked better, but still frightened. She had an unexpected depth of bosom and was prettier than Truxton had thought. She kept glancing at the poker table where Slavin sat, like a bird afraid of a snake. She sang a few more songs and she had an expert, professional way of delivering them which drew applause beyond her due as a vocalist.

She went to a chair on the rear of the dais and sat down. Slavin shoved back his chair, had himself dealt out of a hand and went to her. He bent over and spoke and she kept her head down, her hands locked in her lap. They posed thus for a moment, then Slavin took her arm in a cruel grasp.

He was clever, laughing a little, making it appear as though he was gently urging her. He dragged her forward and thrust her against the bar. He said, "Gents, this is Gracie Bird. She's here to amuse you, drink with you, listen to your troubles. She's the Bird in the Gilded Cage. Haw, haw!"

There were men there who licked their lips, moving forward, and there were others who scowled, drawing back. The girl was frankly scared, now.

Her eyes met Truxton's and recognition leaped into them, as if he were her long lost brother. He had merely been polite to her on the stagecoach and he had no desire to interfere now in any of Slavin's business. His play was to get Slavin to be friendly.

Here he saw a chance to accomplish that, if what he thought was true, and he spoke to her, gesturing her to his side. Men glared at him, but he closed her away from them in the corner where the end of the bar joined the wall. He bought drinks and placed one at her elbow. She did not touch it. Her eyes were violet in that light and she said under her breath, "Please, you must help me! I did not know it was he. I would never have come. In St. Louis he called himself Ed Stedman."

"I wouldn't know about that," Truxton said coldly. "I can't do anything for you—and what good, anyway? You're a singer, aren't you? This is a job, isn't it? What harm?"

She said, "But you don't know him. He

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is a killer. He hates me! God, I'm scared!"

Truxton said, "Aren't you exaggerating, Miss Bird?"

"Exaggerating?" Her eyes widened, then drooped again and the hope went out of them. She said listlessly, "No, I'm not. But it's all right. You're perfectly right to fear him. Everyone fears him."

Truxton flushed. He opened his mouth to make a sharp reply, shut it again. He said roughly, "When I buy a drink, I expect you to drink it." His voice was audible at the poker table, he knew. He turned his back on the girl and walked away. He stood against the wall, ignoring her, watching the play at the poker table.

He did not see her pick up the drink and drain the whiskey without changing expression. Then other men closed in, babbling at her, the only woman in Tinted Basin to whom they could speak their rough language with impnity.

For Parson Weevil—figurehead boss of the town—held the reins tight and Ed Slavin cynically supported him. There were no loose women in the town—only crooked gamblers. Slavin had succeeded in making Tinted Basin his kind of hell-hole.

The girl sang again. A Mexican, attracted by the voice, came into the saloon, slightly drunk, weaving, grinning. He wore a high-brimmed sombrero stained with hard usage, a serape and none-too-clean slashed trousers. Slavin was at the bar, taking a drink.

The girl finished, the Mexican said softly, "Bueno, bueno!" clapping his hands.

Slavin wheeled from the bar, staring. He took one step and kicked hard at the Mexican's knee. He drew his revolver and, holding the butt, slashed upward into the brown face.

BLOOD ran. No man moved in the saloon as Slavin seized the falling man and threw him out the door. Del Truxton held onto the edge of the bar. He was conscious that the girl's eyes were upon him, but he would not look at her. He drank his whiskey and said, "I see you do not like greasers, my friend."

Slavin said in his cold, emotionless voice, "I've warned them a dozen times to stay outa here. They got lice. They crawl with vermin."

"Sure," said Truxton easily. "I know."

Slavin said carelessly, "Have a drink, partner."

They stood elbow to elbow, drinking. After a moment Slavin sighed, "Got to get back to my meat over yonder. It's hell, the hours a man puts in tryin' to make an honest dollar."

"I'd admire to have a chance at it," said Truxton, looking Slavin square in the eyes. "I'm heavy from El Paso." He tapped a money-belt visible beneath his loose fitting black coat. "Thought about buyin' a ranch hereabouts, but I dunno. A good poker game. . . ." He shrugged.

Slavin said, "Yuh know Gorse, huh? I gathered yuh did, anyhow." He was being painfully polite, as though it hurt him. He was eager not to pass up anyone with money, but cautious about running into a crooked professional.

Truxton said, "Knew him in the old days."

Slavin turned away and went to the table. Truxton returned to his whiskey. It was beginning to hum a little in his head now and he wished he had not taken the last one. On the other hand, if Slavin thought him drunker than he was he might have a better chance. He sipped at his glass, swaying a little. He knew better than to overdo it. Slavin would kill him without any more compunction than he had shown pistol-whipping the Mexican.

Truxton was aware of the sweat in the middle of his back. The blank, amazed piteousness of the Mexican's expression as Slavin struck him in the midst of his simple enjoyment of the señorita's song had left a deep mark on the gambler's memory. It was a thing that should not be allowed. He had a stirring impulse to go out and seek the man, to offer him aid, to get his hurts fixed by a doctor.

He stayed at the bar, back rigid. He was, like most gamblers, a fatalist. He heard Slavin call his name and finished his drink with deliberation before he went to the table.

The top of the table was covered with green stuff. The men looked at him calculatingly. Lundquist was big and red-faced. Jorgen, the house man, was thin and white-faced. Peal was tan, a rancher all the way. Grayson sat on the left of Ed Slavin.

Truxton took a place between Jorgen and Peal. Jorgen's teeth were bad and he kept

sucking at them with his tongue. He was a nondescript, rat-faced little man. Truxton bought chips from him, a hundred dollar's worth. He took the money out of his belt, showing the large bills he wore on the outside of his wad of money.

Axel Lundquist, fumbling a little, dealt the tickets. Truxton's gaze went across the room to the girl. He saw her rise, her face white, and go to the side door. After a moment she was gone and he was so deeply engrossed in the game he was scarcely aware of it. Yet he was aware that she had gone. . . .

* * *

Midnight came and passed. Slavin's eyes had sunk deep into his head. He watched Truxton's hands like a hawk. Two other house men had taken positions behind him and as the games closed in the big room, the remaining members of his crooked crew slid silently into a tight circle, sitting on stools, leaning against the wall, training their beetled brows on Truxton.

Lundquist was playing them close to his vest. Peal lost a thousand dollars between eleven and twelve and rose. He said, "I quit. This here feller's got too much on his side."

Grayson, his yellowing mustaches quivering, was playing house money too tight to do any damage. Jorgen was in the same fix. It was fairly simple, Truxton thought, his face expressionless. He only had to play one man. Lundquist was taking a small delight in staying even and watching Slavin lose.

And Slavin was in deep. He was four thousand loser, Truxton estimated. The chips lay carelessly piled in front of Truxton's quiet, slender hands. He fingered his cards, as though reading the pips through their backs, always looking at Slavin, searching the man's face for hints. He never stopped staring, and it was telling on Slavin.

Truxton dealt slowly, holding the cards in such a way that slipping bottoms or second cards was impossible. His sleeves were turned back from his delicate wrists. The cards went around and around.

Slavin cursed. He said, "Deal 'em, deal 'em, Truxton. This ain't a funeral, you know!"

Truxton slid the fifth card to the owner of the Gilded Cage. It was the first time the man's temper had broken. Truxton said, "I'm just a gambler, not a card sharp."

Lundquist guffawed. The tinhorns about the table shifted, watching Slavin for a cue. They were witnessing an event, and they knew it better than anyone except, possibly, Gorse Grayson.

The marshal knew. He had seen great poker players in action in the cowboy capitals, when they had come from the Mississippi, the mid-western towns to prey upon the careless, wealthy cattle barons, the miners laden with loot from the land. The cheaters had been killed, as the westerners grew wiser and warier, but the good ones—Charlie Big, the New York Kid, the Wheeler Boy—had lingered to show what honest, straight poker is like.

Slavin said harshly, "Opened." He put a hundred in the pot.

Grayson played along, his old hands unsteady. Lundquist shrugged and dropped. Jorgen played to protect his master.

Truxton said softly, "I raise five hundred."

"You haven't even looked at your cards!" Slavin snapped.

Truxton was aware then that the man's patience was exhausted. The tinhorns knew it, too. They backed away, and soon there was plenty of space around the table. Gorse Grayson's face went ashen at the sound of Slavin's voice snarling at Truxton.

It was one-sided enough if Slavin provoked a fight. Grayson was the law. Lundquist would stay out. A neutral by temperament, he had no reason to come in between gamblers. The tinhorns, while not individually brave in a fight, made a formidable army. Peal had left the place, no doubt fearing what would come and wanting no part in it.

It was suicide to stay in it. But Truxton had deliberately sought the deal. He had put himself right where he was and he had bet on his judgment of Slavin's poker-playing and Slavin's twitching left eyelid. He had won about four thousand dollars and the chips had not yet been cashed. He had only the colored counters to show for his evening's work.

He drawled into the chilly silence, "Slavin, I can look at you and know my hand is better."

Slavin said, "Damned if that's so."

"All right," Truxton said quietly. "You

say I haven't looked at my hand. You've opened with yours. I'll bet you, right now, any amount on the table, that I've got you beat."

Slavin said, "Two thousand!" He shoved a pile of chips to the center. Grayson and Jorgen, both in the pot, did not utter protest. It was a dead tip-off that they were playing with the house.

Truxton said, "It's a bet!" He matched the chips of the gambler.

Slavin said eagerly, "I've got aces up!"

TWO HIGH pairs before the draw is a hand worth betting on, they all knew. They watched Truxton, and so had he captured their imagination that every face was tight, anxious, staring. The gambler held up his cards, read their edges. He said in his light, steady voice, "No good, Slavin. Three deuces."

He spread them. Slavin came to his feet, knocking the table crooked. He roared, "You—damn you, that's impossible! You looked—"

"You said I didn't," Truxton pointed out. "You accused me of not looking, but of betting into you. I called your bluff."

Slavin roared, "That's a snide sorta crooked, jack-leg betting!"

"You made the bet," Truxton said. "I called you. Not that I don't agree with you," he added. "It was a tinhorn trick. You thought you'd either bluff me or beat my brains out with your two high pair. You should know better . . . against a poker player."

Slavin said, "Why, you dirty, crooked—"

The dam was broken, Truxton knew. Lundquist, not so slow a man as he appeared, was already diving for cover, his pockets full of the chips he had left in the game. The tinhorns were pulling out, seeking cover. A man in the corner picked up a shotgun, but the work was too close for that, and he dared not use it for fear of hurting Slavin.

Truxton sat with his hands on the edge of the table. He apparently had no weapon. He was looking at Gorse Grayson and the old man's white, still face was ghastly.

He had sort of counted on the old man, but he saw it was no good. Grayson was gone inside, dying, perhaps. His courage was wasted, down the drains of the years in Dodge and Abilene.

Still, he knew what he had to do and that was part of it, and if he made it, that was all right, too. He saw Slavin standing there, the embodiment of violent force, the man who had been bilked and tricked, and knew it. He was crouching in the gunman's crouch, with that Colt dangling, tied down to his flank. His narrow-set eyes glittered.

Lundquist, at the door, called, "He ain't got no gun, Ed."

"Throw him a gun," the man roared. There was a slight froth at the edge of his lips. He was stiff with kill-fury.

"Yes, throw me a gun," Truxton said softly. "Grayson, you carry a couple of weapons. Toss me one. I'll fight him."

Grayson muttered something. Slavin said impatiently, "Throw him a gun, you old goat. Damn you, you're about through around here, too. Throw him a hog-leg and lemme kill the tinhorn cheater."

The girl came in the side door. She had something in her hand. Grayson drew out his weapon in front of everyone and put it on the table. The old man's hand was blue-veined and shaky. He started to slide the gun. . . .

Truxton said to the girl without raising his voice, "Don't shoot. Just hold it on that shotgun feller over there."

At the same moment he made his play. His left hand jerked open the stiffened front of his black jacket. His right darted to the revolver beneath his left armpit.

While others watched Grayson's gun slide across the table top Slavin drew with remarkable speed and fired one shot. But the table was rising then as Truxton kicked it over; Slavin's single shot was spoiled. Grayson's gun somehow exploded as it fell off the table.

Jorgen fell across the table legs, clutching a derringer. Grayson's gun accounted for him. Truxton was holding very steady, thumbing his trigger, pouring lead into Ed Slavin, alias Ed Stedman, thief, murderer, gunman and tinhorn gambler.

The man staggered backwards, took a step to the side. The girl could see him now, watch him die. The man with the shotgun took a look at her face and dropped his weapon at a gesture from the short-nosed revolver in her hand.

Truxton said sharply, "There'll be no more trouble here. Grayson, take over! Everyone saw this. It was a shoot-out and

Slavin lost. Grayson, I said that you are to take charge!"

Grayson came erect, staring around. The blood returned to his old face. He managed to steady himself and say, "Truxton's right. Ed tried to down him and Truxton outsmarted him. It was square."

Nobody else spoke. Truxton looked at the chips on the floor, looked around at the tinhorns. He said, "Reckon I own this place now. You can all clear out by tomorrow. And Grayson, you can bust up those crooked layouts. I only want a saloon and a decent poker game."

He had them count the safe and it was true—Slavin could not pay off in cash. Del Truxton had won himself a saloon in Tinted Basin.

He stood in the back after Lundquist and others had congratulated him. The girl was upstairs. He shrugged and went out and up the outside steps.

The Mexican lay on her bed, his face swathed in bandages. The girl said, "I saw it. That's what Slavin did to my brother. In the east."

Truxton said, "He did it to a few others. He killed Atkins, too. I liked Atkins. . ."

She said, "Then you did come here to get him? By trickery?"

"That's right," Truxton said. "I beat him at his own game."

She nodded. "You're a hard man. I need a job, but I don't think I could ever work for you."

He stared at the Mexican. The man had never been in a clean bed with white sheets before in his life, no doubt. In the morning he would awaken and have a chance for his life.

Truxton said, "I'd admire for you to try, though. The joint will be different, you know."

He went down the stairs. It was no use talking to her tonight. But she had done the thing his conscience had urged him to do: doctor the Mexican. He did not mean to let her go, not by a damn sight, if he could help it. . . .

The marshal was waiting at the Ace of Hearts Hotel. He said, "It's all cleaned up. Yuh whipped him good and it's okay by me."

Truxton said, "You'll be all right. The man that put the 'a' in Tinted Basin is dead."

Grayson said, "Yeah . . . yeah. I'm only interested in one thing now, Del. Tell me, did yuh really know yuh had three deuces?"

Truxton shook his head lightly. He said, "If I told you that, you'd go and try to do likewise—and it'd cost you plenty."

He went up the stairs of the hotel. He was wondering about one thing, also. He was wondering if he could really settle down in the little town for a while.

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By MARVIN DE VRIES

TO GET A MAN OUT OF HELL

Roander's Meadow was a far piece and boot-tough Tucson Lace reckoned he could make it through with his three big wagons, past kill-crazy Apaches and a half-breed renegade whom that desert hell rejected. But Tucson hadn't figured that in the last showdown he had to face a man who had leaped from a sandy grave to teach to the living the gunsmoke language of the dead!

TUCSON LACE made no claims for himself, but Windmill Suggs, one of his skinners, bragged that Tucson could get a man out of hell if he were given free rein. "Talk him out, or shoot him out, it wouldn't make no difference," he always said. "That's why I still got my sculp. He kin smell an Apache a mile off."

Tucson Lace himself was quiet and modest, and said all a man had to do was to take advantage of what the situation had to offer, and think ahead a little. He was

hard at it right now because, as he saw it, three difficulties confronted him and he would have to face them all before he got his three wagons safely through to Roander's Meadow.

One was Ben Bassett, an army deserter, who was just coming into prominence as a character on the Fort Yuma-Tucson route. Another was Hawk Took, a half-breed Arivaipa, who had been a desert pest for years. The third was the Arivaipa Apaches, themselves, who were said to be on the prowl.

"The way I look at it," Windmill stated, "we don't need to worry about more'n one of 'em, an' that's the one who jumps us first. Let him worry about the others, because we'll be dead pigeons. I give you credit, Tucson. You've thunk us out of some tight spots, but right now I'd just as soon see some Camp Grant cavalry prowlin' around."

"We can't figure on that."

Windmill suddenly jerked his head. Then he pointed, his voice rising to a shrill wail. "Lookit there. There you got 'em. Not soldiers—Apaches!"

There were four of them on small, fast horses, coming out of a mesquite tangle. The sun glinted on their naked bodies and they were yelling their heads off. As far as Tucson could make out, they were armed with bows and arrows and nothing more. They didn't head for the wagons. Instead, they clattered onto a stretch of hardpan that flanked the route with a sudden drum-roll of sound, pursuing something that eluded Tucson's sharp eye for a second.

Suddenly he found it, a man a-foot on the desert, scrambling over the hardpan in a crazy pattern of fear and exhaustion, stumbling, creeping, running, anything at all to keep out of reach of his pursurers.

"Damned varmits!" Windmill grunted. "It's a trick to pull us off the wagons."

"I don't know, Windmill. We'll have a look." Tucson signaled Pete Hark on the second wagon to come along. Stray Gall stayed behind.

"We're too damned late," Windmill yelped. "They got him."

Tucson opened up with a rifle, hoping the sound would drive them off. The man was down, crouching along a piece of slab rock. Arrows whistled and hissed, and richocheted off the hardpan in broken snags. Tucson's third shot got a man. The Apache bounced several times, like a gaited horse trying to get started, then tumbled and rolled until he came to a jarring stop against a sharp-toothed outcrop. Two Apaches scooped him up on a dead run, and then they disappeared in a wash.

Tucson Lace pulled up beside the fallen man and dismounted. Windmill followed the Apaches to the edge of the wash, then came back. "They're still high-tailin' it. He looks like he's a goner."

"Yes, he is," Tucson said. "He's got a bullet hole in his shoulder and one in his leg. That's why he couldn't run."

"Hell, them varmits didn't have no guns."

"I know it. That arrow through his neck finally finished him off."

THE man was probably twenty-five or thirty. His face was burned by the sun. He had thick sandy hair. His shirt looked too big for him. One of his boots had a built-up heel, probably to hide a limp, although the leg looked sound. His body was black and blue, as though he had taken a hard beating. He had a soiled marshal's dodger in his pocket, offering a reward of three thousand dollars for the capture of Ben Bassett, dead or alive. The description tallied closely with the man on the ground: sandy hair, five feet nine inches in height, limp in right leg.

"This man," the dodger read, "deserted from Camp Grant last August and was last seen at Fort Yuma on the Colorado. He is wanted for the murder of Captain C. H. Austin, U. S. A. At present he is believed to head up a band of desperadoes in the Tucson area."

"Cripes," Windmill exclaimed, "look what we got. Give me a hand, Pete. This jasper's worth cash."

"What're you going to do?" Tucson asked.

"Take him along."

"What for?"

"Bounty, stupid. Look, it says three thousand dollars."

Tucson shoved the dodger into his pocket. "I think not, Windmill."

"Quit yore damn' thinkin'," Windmill growled. "What's wrong with takin' him along?"

"Well, he won't keep, for one thing."

"We'll put him in Stray's wagon. Stray

never notices nothin'—not a damn thing.

"No, I don't think so. I think he's entitled to a decent burial."

"What makes you think that?"

"I'm not sure, but—"

"Better make it snappy," Pete put in, "here comes the Army."

Tucson got up. The troopers crossed the hardpan and pulled up in a half moon. The officer in charge rode in closer, and gave a wry, off-hand salute. "Too late to be of much help, I see," he remarked.

Tucson nodded. "He was dead before we could drive them off."

The lieutenant didn't dismount, but he suddenly bent down and gave the dead man another long, searching look. That's Ben Bassett," he stated finally. "He deserted from Camp Grant some time ago. I can tell from that built-up boot-heel."

"I noticed it," Tucson said.

"There's a bounty on him, ain't there?" Windmill put in.

"So I've heard," the lieutenant answered.

One of the troopers let out a squelched snort and the lieutenant turned on him with sudden fury. "Lasher, you fool," he snapped, "will you learn to keep your big mouth shut? This is no joke." Then he faced Tucson again. "Well, I guess he's your meat." There was a small jeering sound in his voice, as if he wanted to show what he thought of anyone who claimed bounty.

Tucson scowled suddenly. "I hadn't thought of it in that way exactly," he said coldly. Then: "Windmill, fetch a tarp and some shovels from the wagons. Pete, carry the body off the hardpan. We'll bury it by that sahuaro yonder. Agreed, Lieutenant?"

The lieutenant shrugged. "Don't let your pride get the better of you, Mr. Lace."

"You have the advantage of me," Tucson said.

"Lieutenant Mercer, at your service, sir."

PETE and Windmill scrabbled a shallow grave beside the sahuaro cactus. Tucson didn't lift a hand. The lieutenant's poor manners irked him. In a rough country, he considered, the amenities ought to be observed more than elsewhere, at least by those who were supposed to know what manners were.

When Pete and Windmill stood back, he lifted his voice. " 'Man that is born of woman is of few days and full of trouble. . . He fleeth also as a shadow and continueth not. . . For there is hope of a tree. If it be cut down, that it will sprout again. And that the tender branch thereof will not cease though the root thereof wax old in the earth and the stock thereof die in the ground. . . Yet through the scent of water it will bud and put forth boughs like a plant. But man dieth and is laid low. Man lieth down and riseth not, till the heavens be no more. . . .' Lieutenant, a volley, if you please."

The request took the lieutenant by surprise. Probably the only reason Tucson got what he wanted was because he acted as though he expected it as a matter of course. It was painfully scattered and ragged, but it served the purpose of putting an end to the little ceremony. And it brought a thin smile to Tucson's lips, which he hid before anyone could possibly notice. For some reason, military ceremony was not exactly in the lieutenant's line. And Tucson thought he knew the reason why.

Windmill wiped the tears out of his eyes. "That's a mighty nice thing to do for a damned outlaw," he muttered. "I didn't know you could do anything like that, Tucson, without a book or nothin'."

"I may have missed a little of it," Tucson admitted modestly.

"It's a funny world," Windmill continued. "Half an hour ago we was worrying our hair out about the jasper and now we got him planted. I still think I'm goin' to come back some time an' dig him up."

Windmill and Pete tied their riding horses to the tailgates and got the wagons moving. The lieutenant rode forward and joined Tucson. "We'll give you escort as far as Roander's Meadow," he offered. "We're heading there anyway."

"I hope my worries are over," Tucson said.

"They are as far as Bassett is concerned."

"Is that a promise?"

The lieutenant gave him a quick, disconcerting look. "What makes you think you'd have anything more to worry about him?"

"He's smart."

"He was, you mean."

"Yes."

"But you don't want to forget the half-breed, Hawk Took."

"No, I'm not, but he isn't apt to stick his nose in my affairs when he sees I've got an escort."

"We'll be ready for him if he does."

There was a long silence, broken only by the creak of the wagon wheels, and an off-key tune with which Stray Gall was entertaining himself.

"I wonder what Bassett would have done if he'd gotten a chance to jump me, and gotten the wagons," Tucson remarked finally. "Then he would've been in the same boat I'm in now, getting past Hawk Took, and the Arivaipas. How would he have handled it?"

"We won't worry about what Bassett would have tried," the lieutenant repeated.

"I wonder what happened to him back there."

"I can tell you that. He was trying to ambush you, and a stray bunch of Arivaipas jumped him. They wiped his gang out. We saw it, but we couldn't get there in time. Bassett pulled out on foot but he didn't get far."

"Bassett was shot up," Tucson continued thoughtfully. "The Indians had only bows and arrows."

"I think you're mistaken about that," the lieutenant stated flatly.

"Possibly," Tucson agreed.

BY NOW, Tucson was almost convinced that the lieutenant was Ben Bassett. The description on the dodger fitted both the man they had buried, and the man in the saddle beside him. They both had sandy hair. They were about equally tall. The troopers had demonstrated they didn't know much about military ceremony. Bassett was a deserter. He would be apt to know enough to carry it off in some fashion. His uniform fit him snugly and Tucson remembered that the shirt of the man they had buried seemed too large for him. It remained to be seen whether the man riding beside him had a limp. If he did, all doubt would vanish.

Tucson pieced in what he could make of it. Possibly, Bassett had been confronted with the same worry that bothered Tucson. If he did make good his play, and captured the wagons, he still would have Hawk Took and the Apaches to deal with. Troopers on patrol had solved his problem. He had probably ambushed them and stripped them of their uniforms so he could offer to escort Tucson's wagons to Roander's Meadow where he could make his final play. The only hitch in the plan had been the lieutenant. They had probably left him for dead, but somehow he had escaped afoot, only to fall a victim to Apache arrows. The only thing to do, Tucson told himself, is to let him play his hand out till we get to Roander's.

Windmill reported he saw the glint of sun on steel along the rimrock, but if it was the half-breed bandido, Hawk Took, he had sense enough to keep his nose out of something he couldn't handle, and they moved safely through Desolate Pass.

But the Apaches were another matter. In all likelihood, they knew Bassett had massacred the troopers and Tucson's bogus escort wasn't apt to overawe them. But they didn't strike and at the tag end of the day the wagons rolled in at Roander's Meadow.

Old man Roander was glad to see them. He was wrapping his place up for trouble because of the red men. He said his boy, Harley, had been out all day watching them. "He watched your wagons, too. He thought you were in for it but I expect the soldiers scared them off."

"I expect so," Tucson agreed.

The half-breed boy was about sixteen, dark and silent, like his Papago mother, with the same fierce hate for Arivaipa Apaches running hot in his veins. Tucson knew him, and had a grave respect for the slim, knowing boy. As soon as he got a chance, he drew him aside.

"What do you think, Harley," he asked, "did the troopers keep the Apaches off my back?"

"Yes, I think so. I couldn't hear them talk, but they were fixing to attack your wagons. When they saw the soldiers, they changed their minds."

"Can you talk their language?"

"Oh, yes."

"Do you think they are still around?"

"Yes, I know they are. I know where there is a scout. He will watch this place all night. Perhaps in the morning . . ." He shrugged eloquently.

"What about the soldiers? They'll still be here, I expect."

The boy shook his head. "It is hard to understand."

"Did you get close to the Indians?"

"Yes."

"But you didn't hear them say anything about the troopers?"

"No, Señor Lace."

Tucson sighed. "I don't think they're real soldiers, Harley," he confided. "I think the lieutenant is Ben Bassett. But I don't know. I thought the Apaches would know, and that they would attack us anyway. But they didn't, and now I'm not so sure."

"I do not know Ben Bassett."

"No, I don't either."

He told the boy exactly what had happened, and that the four Arivaipas they had chased off were probably some of the same bunch that Harley had been watching. "I think I'm right about the troopers, but I've got to know before the shooting starts. How many Apaches were there?"

"More than fifty. I could go out there, señor, and catch me one. I could torture him and make him talk."

"That," Tucson said, "is exactly what I've been trying to get at. Only, I'm the one who will go."

The boy tried to persuade Tucson to let him do it but Tucson shook his head. "All I need is a knife, son."

"*Si*, here is one. But I know the exact spot, just beyond the wagon trail where the mesquite is thick."

"I know the place. Watch the soldiers. If anything goes wrong, tell Windmill what's up. He's looking for bounty, anyway."

The breath of a smile flicked across the boy's face, nothing more.

Tucson stole away.

THE spot Harley had indicated wasn't far, but Tucson threw a wide circle so as to come at it from behind. It probably took him the better part of an hour, and the last fifty feet took him another solid hour, in which inches were miles of wracking tension, every movement of his body a contortion that dragged him soundlessly forward. The Apache was there. Tucson could see him sky-lighted against the flare of the troopers' campfire, head moving back and forth like a hound dog keening the night.

Tucson kept his knife in his teeth. One thing was in his favor, the Apache stared so long and implacably at the troopers' fire he couldn't adjust his eyes to the dark when Tucson made his final lunge. His arm swept through the air like a bat's wing, and closed around the Apache's throat, pinching off his breath so his startled cry died in his throat. That done, Tucson let his knife go, and hung on. The Apache fought with savage fury, his breath bubbling out with a strangled hiss, his arms snaking around Tucson's legs, his naked body threshing back and forth across the ground like a trampled snake. He couldn't use his knife, because Tucson had come at him from behind, and driven him, belly-down, to the ground. With his free hand, Tucson drove his head down tight into the crotch of his elbow, and held it there. Once the Apache got his chin into it, and tried to break the hold with his teeth. With a sudden rasp of pain, Tucson felt them sink into his flesh, but before the Apache could tear his flesh apart, Tucson gave him a blow on the back of his head, and the Apache went limp as a dead snake.

Tucson carried him in, and turned him over to Harley, but the results were disappointing. "I got him to talk," Harley reported later, "but he didn't have much to tell. He says they didn't raid the wagons because of the soldiers. He doesn't know anything about what you told me, at least I couldn't get it out of him."

"Did you let him go?"

"No."

"Where is he now?"

"I've got him tied up in the barn."

"What are you going to do with him?"

"I promised him his life. I will let him go later, after the rest of his gang clear out."

Tucson was still worried. If his suspicions were wrong, and the lieutenant and his troopers were genuine, he would be in hot water up to his neck if he opened up on them. Unless he knew definitely, one way or the other, the only thing to do was to let the lieutenant choose his own time and place to attack. He had no alternative. But he couldn't afford to give Bassett a bulge like that, because he could muster twice as many men as Tucson could. The dodger mentioned a limp, but the lieutenant hadn't moved around on foot. The lieuten-

ant stayed with his men in spite of Roander's invitation to spend the night in the ramada. Worry gnawed at Tucson all night long, but toward morning he dozed off.

Harley woke him again at daybreak, with a gentle nudge, and a sign to keep quiet. They went outside together. The sky was turning rosy, like colored footlights coming on. Far peaks caught the light, and flamed to life. "The soldiers found our Apache," Harley said. "They've got him in their camp. I think they are going to kill him, and I promised him his life."

Tucson moved faster. The wagons blocked his view. Windmill, Pete, and Stray Gall were on the move. "Keep your guns handy, boys," Tucson told them. "I guess this is it. Stay where you are until I find out."

He moved into the open and saw the Apache he had almost strangled to death the night before. He was on his feet, in a tight crouch, ready to run. He had a rope around his neck. The lieutenant was holding him back with the loose end. The troopers made a half circle around them, their hand guns out. They were laughing and hurrawing back and forth and getting their feet braced for the shooting spree. The lieutenant let out some slack.

"All set, boys?" he asked around the circle. "I'm going to turn him loose."

"Hold it!" Tucson yelled.

The lieutenant jerked around. The Apache slid out from under the loop, and loped in a fast zigzag course toward the distant cover.

ONE of the men—Lasher—fired at his heels, kicking up dust around his legs. Tucson fired a warning shot. "Hold your fire," he yelled, racing in. "Let him—"

Lasher raised his sights, and took another shot. Tucson pulled up and fired again. This time Lasher let out a yowl of pain, and swung around. "Let him go," Tucson yelled again. "Look off there, you fools!"

Three Apaches had showed themselves. Their rifles came up and snapped venomously, covering the flight of the racing figure. The troopers went to the ground and started blasting. Tucson hunkered down. Harley moved behind a wagon. The running Apache went down flat but the three others swarmed in and got him to his feet again, and carried him off.

Tucson had hit Lasher's arm. The man gave him a savage glare. Windmill, Pete and Stray were moving in for a finish fight. Tucson held them up with his arm. The lieutenant came at him with an angry roar. "What d'you mean firing at my men?" he bellowed, forgetting, in all the excitement, to hide his limp.

A cool smile twisted at Tucson's lips. "What we've got to settle can wait . . . lieutenant." He emphasized the title. "In a minute all hell's going to start popping. You want to leave it that way till it's over?"

"What have we got to settle?" the lieutenant flared.

"Whether you ride off with the wagons or whether I do—isn't that it?"

"You know me?"

"I know you. Make up your mind fast. We're going for cover. You can come along or pull out before it starts. Take your choice."

"It won't work, mister. I've got the bulge—and I'll keep it. I kept Hawk Took off your neck, and I kept the Apaches off. They won't tackle this place till we pull out. So we're pullin' out right now—with the wagons."

Old man Roander came to the doorway. He had his rifle in the crook of his arm. His squaw stood beside him. He yelled something Tucson didn't understand. Harley began to move back toward them. Tucson motioned Windmill away and started moving back. Pete and Stray followed, backing off warily.

"What's got into that damned lieutenant?" Windmill yelped. "You goin' to let him go off with the wagons?"

"I'm going to let him try, Windmill, if that's what he wants."

"Cripes, Tucson, sometimes I don't understand you."

They got inside and Roander barricaded the door.

There was a long and painful silence. The room was dark and cool. The smell of hot coffee hung in the air and Tucson felt hungry, but he stayed at a gun-slot and watched.

Bassett turned loose all the riding horses on the place and spooked them off. Roander wanted to shoot the bogus lieutenant down

but Tucson persuaded him to hold his fire. "Let the Apaches get first whack at him."

"The Apaches'll wait until they pull out. They've got their bellyful of soldiers."

"I figure they know by now they aren't soldiers."

"What's that?"

"It's Ben Bassett's gang decked out in army uniforms."

"Then, for God's sake, let me shoot!"

"Hold it!"

The wagons started to creak and Windmill gave Tucson a grumpy look from the far side of the room. Then another sound drifted in, shrill and high and harrowing. The Papago squaw let go a swift sputter of hate. The creak of the wagons stopped. Bassett bellowed orders.

"I can't see a damned thing," Windmill sputtered.

"You'll see plenty in a minute," Tucson answered. "Wait till they get around to that side."

"The Chief Pascual, Madre," Harley yelled, showing his first excitement.

The squaw crossed herself, and, out of a heritage of vast contempt held by all Papagos for Arivaipa Apaches, let go another burst of maledictions.

"Balls of Fire!" Windmill breathed, as the crazy howling rose to a pitch that stretched his nerves clear out of shape.

Harley's eyes glittered like a cat's in the dark, building up in his mind what was going on, savoring it with the focused hate of his half-race, while his father kept a frowning eye on him, wondering, possibly, what it was he had sired.

Bullets thudded into the thick adobe walls with a choked sound, first one, and then another and another, spattering against the walls inside like lost bumblebees. Stray Gall, eerily silent in a corner, eyes flicking from gun slot to gun slot, finally found one he liked, and took his post. Tucson grinned, knowing how deadly he was. Ammunition to fit an assortment of weapons stood in boxes on the table.

BASSETT and his sorry troopers were getting the worst of it. He lost half of them in the first swift rush. One of them was draped over a wagon wheel like a scarecrow, arms spread, chin braced on the fello. Two horses were down. The rest, spooked out of their wits, were tearing harness and gear to shreds. Two of the wagons were locked wheel to wheel. The third was down on a chuckhole, a little farther off. During a brief lull, Bassett and what was left of his gang, headed for the house at a dead run.

"For God's sake, open up!" he yelled as he raced for safety. "Open up!"

Roander looked across at Tucson, who nodded stiffly, and they both went to the door, and pulled away the barricades. When the door went open, Harley stepped out. Roander cussed, but couldn't stop him. The boy had two hand guns, and held off a swarm of Apaches. He downed four before Bassett got inside. One of them flung a war club that came through the door, and clattered against the far wall. Tucson shot him through the throat, and got two more before Harley backed in again and closed the door.

"Dammit, boy, you shouldn't do that," Roander growled.

"Put your guns on the table," Tucson ordered. "Windmill, you—"

Windmill started to turn, but before he got half way around, he let out a sudden grunt and went to the floor in a limp heap. It threw Tucson off guard for a second, long enough for Bassett to get his courage back.

"Shoot 'em down!" he yelled, and went to the floor.

His gun roared, and Tucson felt a seering stab of pain rip through his shoulder. It flung him down, and the cramped room became a bedlam of smoke and sound and yammering guns. A knot of fury grabbed at Tucson's belly. He crawled through smoke and lead, his shoulder screaming with pain. He found Lasher, crouching in a far corner, and shot him down point-blank. At the last moment, Lasher saw him through the smoke, and grabbed him by the hair, and slammed his face against the floor, while he tried to fire his gun with his free hand. He got off one shot, but the bullet went wild, and then the gun slid out of his hand, and he pitched to the floor.

The roar of the guns stopped, but the screeching outside went on. Somebody coughed and cursed. Breath rasped out of somebody's throat, followed by a queer gurgling rattle, and a thud. Tucson prowled through the room, hunkered down, carefully easing his bad shoulder ahead. He

stumbled over a dead trooper, and then another, but neither of them was Bassett.

Smoke curled out of the east window where another thin breeze caught it. Pete Hark was still crouched along the wall under his gun slot, watching and waiting.

"I'm lookin' for Bassett," Tucson said.

"This damn' smoke," Pete muttered, wiping the sweat off his face.

Tucson moved on. "You'd think," he told himself, "in a room this size—"

Then, suddenly, he saw Bassett coming to his feet alongside the table. He had a bullet mark along his face, and streamers of blood snaked down into his shirt collar. His mouth hung open, and his breath rasped in and out like a buzz-saw.

"Just the buzzard I want to see," Bassett got out, and fired.

Both guns roared at the same instant—at least it sounded that way to Tucson. He thought his brain was too fuzzy to make it good. But he saw Bassett lurch and grab for the table and take a few blind steps along the edge, and then with arms flung out crash to the floor in a dead heap.

"He never touched me," Tucson muttered with a look of surprise. But his brain kept getting fuzzier, and his strength went out of him, and he sagged down into the dark shadows that swirled up and engulfed him. . . .

Tucson came out of the dark places sooner than Windmill. The air had cleared, and the squaw had tended to his wound, and stopped the bleeding. The screeching outside had stopped.

"They pulled out," Roander said, when he saw Tucson was listening. "They'll need a cannon before they can knock this place down. Yes, they'll need a damn cannon."

"Did they burn the wagons?"

Roander shook his head. "They tried, but we kept them off with gunfire. You lost some horses, but we can replace them."

The door stood open again. Harley had gone outside to tally the dead. "He hates their very guts," Roander said. "It's in his bones. Sometimes he worries me, the way he feels."

Right then Harley came in, and said he tallied eighteen Apaches. "Chief Pascual, too," he crowed. "That will be the end of that bunch."

"What about those troopers out there?"

"None of them are living."

Windmill began to stir, and roll his head from side to side. Finally, he sat up, bracing himself with his hands on the floor.

"He hasn't got a mark on him," Roander said, "except a lump on his head. I think a bullet stunned him."

"I'll give you a hand in just a minute, Tucson," Windmill spoke up with a dizzy lurch. "Put yore guns on the table, you buzzards, and be quick about it," he flared angrily, still living the moment when the bullet had floored him. "Hell, where are they?"

"Boothill-bound, Windmill," Tucson said. "Bassett jumped us again, after we got inside, and—"

"Bassett!"

"Yeah. Oh, you didn't know, did you?"

"Know what? I don't know nothin'."

"They aren't troopers, Windmill. They're Bassett and his gang."

This time Windmill took it in. A faint grin spread across his face. "Bassett!" he crowed. "Bounty!"

PHANTOM GUNS AT JACARANDA ★ POWDERSMOKE PILGRIMS

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★

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RAMROD OF THE

"This range war ain't over," Stock Inspector Barney Cassidy told Quanah Camber. "You won't git far before bushwhackers cut you down. I don't like to see a brave man murdered. I'm headed for Montana and I know the trails to ride, where to git grub—and how to stay out of a grave. I'd be proud to take you along." And when Camber said, "What's the pay-off at the Montana end?" Cassidy didn't answer . . . For too often in the past he had ridden with ghosts from the outtrails. . . .

GUN-TRAP DRIVE

CHAPTER ONE

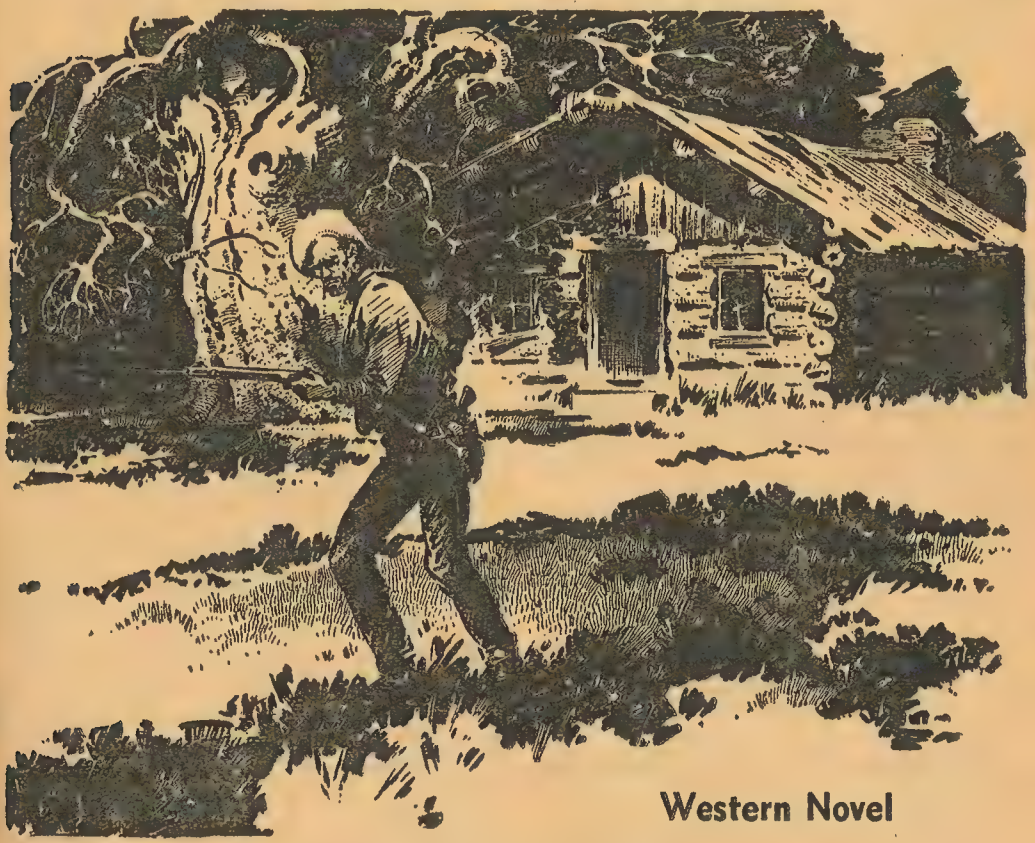
"Red Meat Needs Salt"

WYOMING'S cattle war had exploded and stampeded the gunfighters who had been imported to wage it. Some had been rounded up and shipped out by train, like so many cattle. Others had saddled fast horses and quit the country.

Quanah Camber was left behind, locked in jail, round-siding on a bunk, smoking Bull Durham cigarettes and reading the accounts of the war in old pink *Police Gazettes*. Like eating pie, he told the jailer, after a big meal of raw meat. Putting too much taller on his lean ribs, Quanah said. Jail life wasn't hard on a man if he savvied how to take things easy.

The law had forgotten Quanah Camber during the range war. The law that had thrown the tall, black-haired, gray-eyed cowpuncher in jail and lost the key.

The judge asked the prisoner why he had been jailed. Camber replied that he'd pondered that same question the first ten days but hadn't found the answer. He had ridden into the cowtown and gone on a spree. Bucked somebody's horse down the street,



The stock of his saddle carbine recoiled against his shoulder as he squeezed the trigger.

Western Novel

By

WALT COBURN

and into a few saloons, and banged away with his six-shooter at the stars and mebby-so a few town lights.

He told the judge his home range was down in Indian Territory. He had drifted north to Wyoming just for the hell of it when he heard about the cattle war. It was no more, no less than the call of adventure.

"You look," the white-haired judge scowled, "like you had Injun blood."

Quanah Camber had stiffened. He stood six feet two in his high-heeled boots. His wide shoulders wedged down to a lean belly. His hair was coarse, straight, and black as a horse's mane. His jaw was lean and his mouth wide and straight. He was thirty. His eyes looked straight at the judge. He gave his answer in a quiet voice.

"My mother was a full-blood Cherokee. As fine and brave a woman as ever lived. My father was Buckskin Camber. He was a United States Government scout who served under Miles and Crook. He piloted wagon trains across the plains without losing a man, woman, child or a head of livestock. He was a friend and drinking companion of Jim Bridger and Kit Carson. You'll find his name on the Army records and never a black mark against it.

"Yes, sir, I have what you call Injun blood. I'm proud of it. It's mixed with good white man's blood. I'll risk the charge of contempt of your court by asking Your Honor a question: Is it a crime against the laws of Wyoming to be born a half-breed?"

The courtroom was packed. Cattlemen, cowpunchers, tinhorn gamblers, a quota of town loafers and barflies, a colorful sprinkling of ladies of the night. During the middle of the day, when things were dull, the courtroom offered diversion. In the court was to be found release from the tenseness of the range war. It gave men a chance to relax and ease the weight of heavy cartridge belts. As they saw this tall breed stare down the judge—who was a quart a day man and at times none too certain of his Blackstone's law—the men sat up straighter in their seats. They exchanged quick looks, nods of approval, faint grins. The ladies perked up noticeably, fetching out powder puffs. Quanah Camber was easy to look at.

"Three months in the hoosegow," they whispered. "A shame and a crime to keep such a handsome gent put away out of sight."

Sweat beaded the judge's florid, whiskey-veined face. He wanted to be rid of this man who spoke in the well modulated voice of a gent with some education. A damned half breed who had the gall and nerve to stand on his two feet and brag about being part Injun.

The judge would have glady thrown the book at Camber. More than anything, he wanted to send him to prison. But Camber was a ward of the United States Government, and civil judges had to be careful.

The judge consulted his papers and books, his steel-rimmed spectacles hanging precariously on the bulbous nose. The courtroom stank of sweat and stable and tobacco and honkeytonk perfume.

"Quanah Camber," The judge looked over the steel rims of his sweat fogged spectacles, cleaned his whiskey voice and went on, "Charged with drunkenness and disorderly conduct. You have already served ninety days in jail. The hundred dollar fine is remitted. Case dismissed!"

He pounded with his gavel. "Order in the Court!"

CAMBER walked out of the courtroom. Men he had never seen before grinned and nodded. The women smiled and eyed him boldly. He carried his Stetson hat in his hand and walked with short cowpuncher steps. Outside he pulled the fresh morning air into his lungs, pulled on his hat and headed down the street to the feed and livery barn where he had, three months ago, left his horse and saddle.

He found the critter, a strawberry roan quarter-horse gelding, in the feed yard. His saddle, blanket, bridle and chaps, powdered with dust, were in the saddle and harness room. The roan gelding was fat and sleek.

"John Law," Camber told the barn man, "will pay the feed bill."

Camber wiped the dust from the full-stamped round-skirted saddle. The gelding humped up when he slowly tightened the front cinch of the double-rigged Texas-made saddle.

He paid no attention to the stranger who had followed him to the barn from the courtroom. Quanah Camber was buckling on his brush-scarred chaps when the stranger spoke.

"You got a bill-of-sale for that roan geldin'?"

Camber had buckled on the filled cartridge belt and holstered ivory-handled six-shooter the jailer had returned to him when the judge had set him free. His right hand brushed the gun-butt. He stared hard at the man.

The man was short, heavy-set and getting paunchy. His hair and drooping mustache were reddish gray. He had a pair of hard green eyes. He stood hipshot, his weight on one leg—the way most old cowhands stand. There was a slow grin spreading across his face as he rubbed the heel of his hand across a stock inspector's badge pinned to an old unbuttoned vest.

Quanah Camber smoothed the Q brand on the roan's left shoulder. "That's my brand, mister," he said. "If you know brands like you should, holdin' down a stock inspector's job, you'll savvy the Q iron. Indian Territory. Down in the Cherokee Strip. A man don't pack no bill-of-sale to prove ownership to his own private horse. Or is this another excuse to drag a damned breed up before another kangaroo court?"

"And supposin' it is, Camber?"

"Then either you or me is goin' to take one hell of a gun-whippin' right pronto!"

"Tough?"

"Just a half-breed," Camber said, "standin' up on his two hind laigs to take his own part."

"Regardless, eh?" the man said.

"Regardless, mister."

"That," the stock inspector chuckled, "settles that. A man like you might do to take along."

Quanah Camber grinned faintly and shook his head. "I got a bellyfull of your Wyoming country. I'm driftin' yonderly—even if you make me break my trail out with a gun. I come here full of wild notions. Three months roundsidin' in that John Law medicine tepee I learned a lot of the outside news. It stunk like bad meat. I coulda broke jail almost any night but I figured the sign wasn't right. I want no part of this Wyoming war. There's too much bad medicine made on both sides. This Injun ain't takin' the war trail."

"Headed back for the reservation?"

"Not till I see more country."

"Broke?"

"Not a dollar in my pocket. I'll ride the grubline."

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"Montana?"

"I got a hankerin' to see them big Yellowstone geysers. When I was a button Buckskin Camber used to tell it scarey about them big geysers. I want to see them water spouts. Montana, I reckon. . . ."

"You talk to me like a cowhand but you talked like some college-learnt dude to the judge."

"Uncle Sam sent me to Carlisle University. I didn't let my hair grow long when I got back to the reservation. Book learnin' comes in handy, but it does a man no good in a cow camp. What's actually on your mind, mister?"

"My name," said the stock inspector, "is Barney Cassidy, hired by the Montana Livestock Association. I'm reppin' down here in Wyoming for the Montana outfit. Checkin' up on a cattle rustlin' deal that begun in Wyoming and trailed a lot of stolen cattle into Montana. My job here is cleaned up. I've gotten what I came after. I'm on my way back to Montana. I liked the way you stood up to that judge—and I'd hate to see you dry-gulched before you got out of Wyoming." His grin faded. The twinkle went out of his eyes and left them cold.

"This range war ain't over," Cassidy went on. "Every stranger is under suspicion. You won't git far before bushwhackers cut you down. I'm not talkin' through my hat. I don't like to see a brave man murdered. I'm headed for Montana; I know the trail outa here; the places to ride wide around. I know the ranches where a man kin get a bait of grub and feed for his horses and bed down of a night without fear of wakin' up in hell for breakfast. I'd be proud to take you along."

"And what's the pay-off at the Montana end of the trail, mister?" Quanah Camber put the question quietly.

Barney Cassidy chuckled and nodded his grizzled head. "You got a smart brain for figurin' things out quick. If the deal panned out, we'd both be well fixed so's we'd never have to work for wages no more. We'd own our own iron—and it's a big outfit. All we got to do is take it away from the cattle rustlers that's built it up. But I'm not tryin' to sell you a bill of goods. And I shore as hell ain't got ary gold brick to peddle. When we git there you kin size it up. Throw in with me or ride on away from it and no hard feelin's. But if it's excitement and adventure that's warmin' your blood, it's made to order."

QUANAH CAMBER grinned. "You make is sound mighty interestin', mister. It could be a law trap to ketch a stranger."

"Did Buckskin Camber ever tell you about the time he taken the LFD trail herd to Montana? When the boys got paid off, a few of 'em taken a pasear to Yellowstone Park. They camped at a geyser place where there was a feller put horseshoes and old boots and hats into a geyser hoodus that crusted everything with a thick coatin' of white lime like frost an inch thick. And the cowpunchers talked the Red Barney Kid, who was the LFD horse wrangler, into dippin' his brand new Stetson hat into that geyser, and it dried hard as a cardboard hat and coated with that inch-thick white stuff and it was all the hat he owned and cost him a month's wages."

Quanah's grin widened.

"I was that Red Barney Kid," Cassidy said. "When you told that likker-soaked judge you was Buckskin Camber's son, I wanted to stand up and holler three cheers. Because Buckskin bought me a new hat and I kin still repeat, word for word, a lot of the yarns Buckskin told me when me'n him stood night guard together.

"I stayed in Montana, and for years, when I'd see some rider top the skyline headed my direction, I hoped it'd be Buckskin. But I never saw him again; they said he'd married and settled down in the Nation and was lockin' horns a-plenty with the white man treaty signers who was tryin' to steal back what Uncle Sam give the Injuns. Buckskin was the big hero I worshipped as a kid. Do you still figure I'd double-cross that man's son?"

Quanah Camber held out his hand. Cassidy gripped it. Quanah said old Buckskin had spun a lot of yarns about the red-headed horse wrangler who had been twelve years old when he went up the cattle trail. A range orphan. With a big silver-mounted Mexican spur tied on one bare foot and a big old six-shooter without a hammer that wore a callous on the kid's flank.

"I'd be proud to go along with you, sir," Quanah said.

"You call me Barney. I'll git my horse now. That roan geldin' of yours is gonna break in two when you step up on him, Quanah."

"I'll try to set 'im."

The roan pitched, bawling and squealing. Camber rode the bucking horse without trouble. When the roan quit pitching he was gentle enough for a schoolmarm to ride. The critter was just full of hell, fat and rollicky from three months in a feed yard. Quanah felt just like his roan Q gelding, he told Cassidy when they rode away from town, headed north.

Quanah told Barney that he'd lost his Q outfit down in the Cherokee Strip. Some smart aleck government man had dug up what he claimed was proof that Buckskin Camber had never legally married the Cherokee squaw who had lived for years with him as his wife and born him a son,

"My father and mother was married accordin' to the Indian custom. That was good enough for Buckskin and my mother. They were man and wife, accordin' to Indian religion. And in the eyes of God, because Buckskin believed in God Almighty. It was only after Buckskin and his Cherokee wife were dead that the treaty-breakers had the guts to get revenge on their half-breed son. . . .

"I saw it comin'. I sold my cattle and horses and Q iron and rode away from the ranch where I'd bin born and raised. I've got a dollar or two in the bank, a horse under me and my health. I've got no tears to shed, no snake track along my back-trail. Ahead yonder is my skyline. I'd like to hear more about this Montana deal. . . . "

"It'll be dangerous, Quanah."

"Red meat needs salt."

CHAPTER TWO

The Squaw

THE RANCH where Stock Inspector Barney Cassidy sent Quanah Camber straddled the big Missouri River at the old Fort Musselshell Crossing. On the north side of the crossing was Muleshoe Bend. Here were giant cottonwoods, willows and grass that touched your stirrups. Where the brush was cleared off they cut wild hay and stacked it for winter use.

Muleshoe Bend was fenced off. There were log cabins, a log barn and cattle shed and pole corrals and a branding chute. Muleshoe Bend and its badlands range, spreading north to the rolling prairie country, was a big outfit. It was called the Muleshoe. Unless a man used the regular crossing at the mouth of the Musselshell he had to swim the big Missouri twice, as the saying went, to get on the other side. Meaning the rider had to swim the river, ride across Muleshoe Bend, swim the river again, and still be on the south bank.

Barney Cassidy drew a map in the dirt with a whittled stick to explain it to Quanah.

"That's the Muleshoe outfit. Cattle and horses branded Muleshoe. As purty a layout as ever a cowman could hope for, the Muleshoe. I know—because it belonged to me! I toughed out the hard winter there and come out in the spring with a few head left. It wasn't the hard winter that wiped me out; I coulda built 'er up again in a few years. It was the cattle rustler outfit that come into the country and located acrost the river, at old Fort Musselshell, that hamstrung my outfit. They was too many for me and I wasn't tough enough to cut down the big odds with a gun." Barney Cassidy smiled grimly.

"Neither was Marvin Tanner. He'd located there on the south side after the fur tradin' post at Fort Musselshell was abandoned. He moved in and built his cabin, barn, cattle shed and corrals; put up his wild hay and registered his MT brand and burnt it on a sizable bunch of cattle. He had a remuda of good horses, too.

"Marvin Tanner had a good eye for business. He built a ferryboat, bought a barrel of whiskey and turned one of his log cabins into a saloon. Some say he drunk up the profit he made on his likker. And he was big-hearted about givin' it away. Whiskey, when a man gits to where he's puttin' away a quart a day, slows a feller down. Makes him lazy. Winter time he sets around the stove instead of gittin' out buckin' the snowdrifts. Marvin Tanner wintered mostly inside his log cabin saloon. When the warm chinook wind cut the drifts and opened up the snowbound cow country, the MT cattle was dried hides and bones. Wiped plumb out. And the hell of it was he had two-three big haystacks left over that coulda saved some of his cattle. All that

Marvin Tanner wintered was his remuda.

"When the ice broke up in the river, Tanner got the seams in his ferryboat caulked, and when the river went down, with the snags floated away by high water, he slid his ferryboat down the skids into the river. He freighted in a few barrels of whiskey along with his grub. Tanner was outa the cattle business. But he had his ferryboat and saloon. So he told me when he come acrost the river on his first ferryboat crossin' that spring to fetch me a jug.

"And he fetched along a proposition he put to me after he'd watched me take a few pulls at the jug. Marvin Tanner was half drunk and let on like he hadn't a care in the world. Like a man standin' on top of the big heap. Talkin' big. Backin' his loud-mouthed whiskey talk with a roll of foldin' money that'd choke an ox.

"'I shore wintered good, Barney,' he kept a-tellin' me.

"He waited till he figgered his rotgut booze had me softened up to the meltin' point. Then he asked me how I'd wintered.

"I showed him the bare ground where my haystacks had bin, and my handfull of pore cattle. I still had my remuda and good health and the guts to try again. I'd sent the missus and my kid daughter to Chinook that fall so's she could keep the young 'un in school. The missus had died that winter and it was nearly spring before the mail reached me with the bad news, but I wasn't tellin' my troubles to Tanner. He had somethin' on his mind, and I had a hunch what it was, and I wanted him to lay it on the line. And when I taken another drink with him, he laid 'em face up.

"'Some fellers bin winterin' with me Barney. They got money. Set a rock bottom price on your Muleshoe outfit and I'll pay you the cash money they're layin' right on the barrelhead.' Tanner flashed his big bankroll in my frost-bit face.

"Me'n Tanner had come up the trail from Texas together. Like as not Buckskin Camber told you about Tanner. He had a little outlaw blood in him; always in trouble with the Texas Rangers. Shot and killed a Ranger over some gal and it was time he pulled outa Texas before the dead Ranger's friends taken it up. Them Rangers stick together. So Tanner had throwed in with the trail herd outfit Buckskin taken up the trail. Marvin was a likable cuss in some ways. Hot-headed, quick-triggered—a good man to let alone. But till he made me that proposition I'd never figgered Tanner as treacherous.

"Mebbyso if I'd bin alone I mighta done different, I'll never know. But the wife was dead, and she'd left me the young 'un to look after, and I didn't ever want that baby of mine to ever be ashamed of her daddy. My wife's death had bin a gut-shot. In my pocket was the dyin' letter she'd written me. The likker I'd drunk hadn't deadened my grief. Just the opposite. I knowed who had bin winterin' with Marvin Tanner. They was renegades from the Hole-in-the-Wall country down in Wyoming. Not tough enough or man enough to throw in with the Wild Bunch. They was small-caliber outlaws whittlin' on the big herds in Wyoming and wipin' out the little ranchers, to boot. With a cattle war a-cookin' to a boil in Wyoming, these fellers played both ends ag'in' the middle. The cattle drives they fetched up outa Wyoming was in different brands: big brands and little nester irons. Them renegades winterin' at the old Fort Musselshell ranch wasn't the curly wolves they let on to be. They was crossed with coyote.

"I BUSTED the jug Marvin Tanner had fetched me. Busted it on the end of his ferryboat. I told him that it was only for old times' sake I hadn't busted it on his head. I told him to take his roll of dirty money back to the cattle thieves who had sent him over to my place. And I told him to never cross his ferryboat over to my side; that from now on the Missouri River was the deadline. For Marvin Tanner and his cattle rustlers not to cross that deadline. A man ain't supposed to beat up a man when he's drunk but I throwed away the rules and I give Tanner the worst whuppin' I could give a man and throwed him on his damned ferryboat and sent him back acrost the river. I'd declared myself—and I'd declared war!"

Barney Cassidy grinned when he told it. But his eyes were cold.

"It taken a few years for Tanner and his rustlers to run me off," he told Quanah Camber. "But in the end they managed to git my Muleshoe outfit.

"I had my kid, Katie, to think about. I was all she had. And I had to be both daddy

and mother to her. I got a job ramroddin' a big outfit. Put Katie through school. I boarded the young 'un out with the postmaster and his missus, there at Chinook. I had that big cow outfit to run and I was lucky if I got to town once in three months, to see the kid. Even then it would be just overnight, or a few hours, or a day or two—and that ain't enough time for a father to spend with a growin' daughter.

"So me'n Katie just drifted apart durin' the years when she was growin' up. Old Clem Taylor and his missus just about worshipped the young 'un; spoiled her all they could with kindness and let her have her own way—and a kid that age is like a bronc you're gentlin' and will take every little advantage. Not that I'm blamin' Clem and his wife for what happened. And I shore can't blame little Katie, who was left alone to figger out things that crop up in a youngster's life. Them things are just as big as the real hard knocks that come later in life; things that knife a kid's young heart and make it bleed inside."

Barney Cassidy's voice sounded a little tight and husky and he was measuring each word, now, when he went on.

"Each time I seen Katie in town it seemed like she was changed more. She was goin' to high school. Gittin' good marks. Growin' up fast. Though she'd never be big. About five foot three. She was red-headed and freckled and had black eyes like her mother. Had her own horse she kept at the feed and livery barn and looked after. She had a way with horses. A natural rider.

"Then the Montana Livestock Association appointed me chief stock inspector, at good pay. I could make Chinook my headquarters and live in town. When that official letter reached me at the ranch it was like the answer to a man's forgotten prayer. I couldn't git to Chinook fast enough to tell the good news to little Katie. I reckoned we'd git us a house and it'd be home for both of us. And that law badge was what I needed to take the fight ag'in' Tanner right straight to the old Muleshoe Bend. I saddled my private horse and hit a long trot and never pulled up till I reached Chinook.

"I got there too late. Katie was gone. She'd graduated from high school the week before, while I was busy windin' up the calf round-up, and pulled out. That was the first I actually knew about the hell she'd bin goin' through, and coverin' up her hurts with a lot of wild tomboy scrapes that old Clem Taylor and his wife had covered up for her and said nothin' about to me when I'd come to town.

"It was all in a letter Katie left for me. There was blots where her tears had splashed."

Cassidy's mouth flattened in a hard grin. "The big kids at school had told her that her father was a rank coward. That Barney Cassidy had bin whipped off his Muleshoe ranch by Tanner; that I was scared to ride within miles of my own home range. It was Marvin Tanner's big overgrown ornery son Clint, goin' to school winters at Chinook, who had kept at Katie with his big bully teasin' and plaguin'. Clint and his big followin' amongst the school kids made life miserable for little Katie.

"But that wasn't the worst of it," Barney said. "It was the nickname those town kids give her. Clint Tanner called her Squaw."

"Squaw?" Quanah Camber echoed.

"Yeah. I married a half-breed Assiniboine girl. Marvin Tanner used to call me Squawman. But Marvin always grinned when he said it and it didn't mean a thing. It was only after me'n Tanner had that fallin'-out that he commenced callin' me that damned Squawman so that he made it sound like a fightin' name. And him married to a honkeytonk gal that dyed her hair yellow and smoked cigareets and nibbled at his bottle and cussed like a mule-skinner. So young Tanner commenced callin' my little Katie the Squaw.

"She stuck it out till she graduated. She wrote in the note that she was goin' a long ways. That if I tried to overtake her and drag her back, she'd kill herself. She wrote that she was changin' her name. When she got far enough away so that nobody would know she was a squaw, she'd quit runnin' and settle down and make her own livin'. And nobody would know she had any Injun blood because she was red-headed and freckled and the only Injun she showed was her black eyes. She couldn't change the color of her eyes. It was a gut-shot, that letter!"

"You never tried to trail her and talk her into comin' back, Barney?"

"No," Cassidy said. "She meant what she said. She'd kill herself. When I talked

it over with old Clem Taylor and his missus, I found out a lot of things. How she'd cried herself to sleep many a night. With her door locked so's they couldn't git in to her and she woudn't tell that pore old couple what ailed her."

QUANAH CAMBER said he understood how she felt. That he knew what it was to be called an Injun or a damned half-breed. Only it had never hurt him because he'd been brought up to be proud of his Cherokee blood.

"I heard what you told that judge, son," Cassidy said. "And that courtroom that was packed with so-called white men. And while I listened I kept thinkin' to myself that I'd give all that I ever had and hope to git back, if my little Katie could be there to see you stand up that-away and declare yourself proud of bein' part Injun.

"But that's gittin' away from what we got on hand, Quanah. Though it gives me one more reason to wipe out Marvin' Tanner, his son Clint and them rustlers."

"And one more reason," Quanah Camber said, "why I'm rarin' to tackle the job. I want to cut the sign of this Clint Tanner."

"Never turn your back on him, son. Clint is big, tough, bad and treacherous. He runs the outfit; ramrods both ranches. Marvin runs his ferryboat and saloon. Clint is wagon-boss when the round-up starts. He works a renegade crew of tough cowhands. Clint's cleaned up the Muleshoe and MT remnants. He managed to git a brand registered that he calls the Ox Cart Wheel.

"This Ox Cart Wheel is like the Wagon Wheel brand in Wyoming that the cattle rustlers at Brown's Hole use. Only it's blotched. And Clint Tanner kin change almost any brand into that blotched Ox Cart Wheel that is nothin' but a big round blotch on a critter's hide. And he crops both ears for his earmarks."

Quanah Camber wondered why the Livestock Association let Clint Tanner get away with a brand and earmarks that made brand-working and earmark altering so simple.

Cassidy grinned. "I talked the Association into it, Quanah. I'm givin' Clint enough rope so's he'll git tangled up in his own hungry loop. Could be a hangman's knot tied in it for a hondo when the law moves in on the old Fort Musselshell Crossin'. And we're about to move in."

"Whenever you say, Barney."

"You'll be workin' lone-handed, Quanah, till the sign is right for me to lend you a hand."

Cassidy and Camber had ridden the grubline out of Wyoming and into Montana, stopping at ranches where Barney was well known. Where no questions were asked. All the way up into Montana Quanah knew they were following the sign of a big drive of cattle that somebody had trailed out of Wyoming.

The sign of this herd kept getting fresher each day. Then one evening, between sundown and nightfall, they sighted the herd being watered and grazed onto the bedground. The trail outfit was camped on water.

It was a pack outfit. No mess-wagon or bed-wagon. Each man had his own pack horse to carry his bed. The kitchen mules packed the dutch ovens, skillets, coffeepot and grub. The blacksmith mule packed horseshoes, muleshoes and shoeing outfit. Each man had a string of ten good saddle horses. In the remuda were a hundred head of extra horses. Some were broken, others were green broncs. The brands on all the horses and mules had been blotched.

There were fifteen brands in the cattle drive and the herd wasn't in any road-iron. It was a remuda of stolen horses and mules.

But Quanah Camber did not know that until Inspector Cassidy told him as they rode slowly toward the camped trail herd.

"But the men ain't rustlers or horse thieves," Cassidy said. "Every cowhand in that outfit yonder is hand-picked by the outfit he's reppin' for. He's hand-picked for his ability as a cowhand, his loyalty to the outfit he works for, and his ability to handle hisself in a bad tight.

"There's both big and little outfits represented. Their brands are on them cattle. The reps has their orders. And they all know what they're up against. It looks like what it ain't. Even the stock inspectors, that had their secret orders to let this trail herd pass along, think they've let a trail herd of rustled cattle and stolen horses pass along up the trail. Every cowhand in that outfit has spent enough time inside the Hole-in-the-Wall to pass himself off for a cattle rustler. And one or two of them

stock inspectors along the way was slipped a little hunk of foldin' money to grease the way. And the stock inspectors who was too honest to be bought off was told to pass the trail herd and keep their mouths shut.

"I'VE BIN a long time workin' this out, Quanah. It had to be done slow and cautious, so's not to git anybody suspicious. So's not to spook Clint Tanner, who is takin' delivery on these cattle and horses. Even now, and from here on, there's the big risk that Marvin and Clint Tanner has bin tipped off to the whole deal. And this outfit will trail their cattle right slap-dab into a bushwhacker gun-trap at Fort Musselshell Crossin'. That's a chance them fellers all know they're takin'. Any one of them might have bin bought off by the rustlers. Any one might have bin tempted by big money to sell out. That's the risk them cowhands is takin'. That's the risk you've got to take when you take over the job of trail boss of that outfit you see beddin' down for the night."

"Me? Trail boss?"

"Yep." Barney Cassidy was grinning.

"I bin holdin' out on you, son," Cassidy said suddenly. "And I played a dirty low-down trick on you. I found out who you was when you rode into that cowtown down in Wyoming. When I sighted you ridin' in and out of the saloons, pitchin' a borrowed horse up and down the street, bangin' off your six-shooter, I thought I was watchin' the ghost of Buckskin Camber."

"The one thing I still lacked bad was a trail boss I could trust. Because there'll be big money laid on the barrelhead at Marvin Tanner's saloon—enough money to tempt any honest man to hit the South America trail. If you was Buckskin's son I figgered it quick you'd be the man for that trail boss job. So I had you throwed in jail for paintin' the town. And I had you kept on ice till I was ready to take you along. And when you stood up to that two-bottle judge and declared yourself, I knowed I had my man."

Quanah Camber's grin drove the last doubt from Barney Cassidy's mind. Quanah's next words clinched it.

"I'm damned proud, sir," Quanah Camber said quietly, "that you trust me that far. I'll do my damndest to git my job done."

They had reined up a mile from where the herd was being bedded down. The leaders held up after they had watered, the swing and drags fetched up, the ragged fringes picked up and turned into the main herd. It was all done at a walk. A dozen cowhands riding around and around the cattle that stood cud-chewing. Snatches of songs. Cow country songs. Ribald, with a minor-keyed plaintive tone, lonesome-sounding as the howl of a prairie wolf. Dusk graying the Montana sky and the hills on the skyline. Smell of sagebrush; tinkle of horse bells as the remuda was driven into the rope corral. Smoke from the supper fire where the dutch ovens and big black coffeepot warmed. A trail herd camp on the willow-fringed banks of the creek. There was something about it that swelled a man's heart and made him silent as he watched, listened and smelled; it was a part of a cowhand's life. Part of his being and all that he had on earth. The bigness, and the peaceful little sounds; and always the hardships and dangers. A man lived today and got all he could from it and rode at tomorrow in a reckless lope.

Barney Cassidy and Quanah Camber sat their horses, watched and shared the silence. Then the grizzled stock inspector spoke quietly.

"Feller named Dane Loveless is ramrodding' the outfit. It's his job you're takin'. Loveless ain't goin' to like it. He's the only real cattle rustler in the outfit. Workin' pardner of old Marvin Tanner and young Clint. He's pointed more than a few trail herds of stolen cattle outa Wyoming to old Fort Musselshell Crossin'. Like as not I'll have to kill Loveless. . . ."

CHAPTER THREE

Cassidy—Hold-out Artist

BARNEY CASSIDY had timed it so that most of the cowpunchers would be at camp when he and Quanah rode up. The herd was bedded and the evening star showed and the two cowpunchers on first guard had taken over the herd. Supper was over and the nighthawk had taken the remuda out for the night. The cook, wearing a soiled floursack apron, lifted dutch oven lids with a long pothook. The cowpunchers lazed around the sagebrush smudge they had built to smoke away the mosquitoes.

Camber sensed, rather than saw, the guns

that covered him and Cassidy as they rode up out of the gathering darkness. No gun actually showed. Nobody called a greeting. The shadows hid their identity and when Cassidy pulled up outside the glow of the supper fire, Quanah did likewise and his hand gripped his six-shooter. Nobody invited them to step down, turn loose their horses and have supper grub. If anybody recognized Cassidy they gave no sign.

"I'm lookin'," Cassidy said flatly, "for Dane Loveless."

"Loveless ain't here, mister," a man said.

"Ain't he ramroddin' this outfit?"

There was no immediate reply. The stock inspector had told Quanah that none of these men would know him, even by sight. They had been hand-picked by the outfits they worked for, sent into the Hole-in-the-Wall with orders to get themselves hired by the rustler ramrod Loveless, who never took the same crew twice when he pointed a stolen herd into Montana. So none of these men knew Barney Cassidy. None would know him until the sign was right and he showed up with proof of his identity. That identity was to remain secret until the showdown came at old Fort Musselshell Crossing. Barney wasn't flashing a law badge. He packed it in his pocket.

The only man in this outfit, Barney had told Quanah before they rode up to the camp, who knew him, was Dane Loveless. And Dane Loveless wasn't here.

Cassidy's ragged brows were knitted in a puzzled scowl. He had told Quanah that he was going to have to kill Loveless. And Quanah was tensed and ready to back any play the older man made.

A tall cowpuncher got to his feet and walked toward where Cassidy and Camber sat their horses. His right hand was near the holstered six-shooter hung on his sagging cartridge belt. He halted ten feet away and stood spread-legged.

"Loveless high-tailed it when he sighted you two horsebackers Injun up on the outfit. Loveless is cautious that-away about strangers. He left me to strawboss the outfit till he drifted back."

The lanky cowhand bit off each word and spat it out. The others were on their feet now, grim and hard-eyed and dangerous looking. Suspicion had their nerves pulled taut.

"What's your name?" Cassidy asked flatly. He kept staring at the man, his eyes hard.

"Slim Luther. I'm reppin' for the Hat outfit. Now who the hell are you two hombres? And how many more of you is siftin' up outa the dark?"

Cassidy leaned across his saddle horn. He eyed Slim Luther. "Which way does your wind blow, Luther?"

"To'rds the northward, stranger."

"Where's the shallow crossin', Luther?"

"Old Fort Musselshell, stranger." Luther's voice was barely audible.

"Where does a man swim the Missouri River twice to git on the fu'ther side, Luther?"

"Muleshoe Bend, stranger."

"Satisfied, Luther?"

"Light," Slim Luther nodded, "and rest your saddles."

Luther turned to the others who had stood back out of earshot and made a brief gesture with the hand that had come away from his gun-butt.

"These two fellers," Luther said, "will do to take along."

"I'm driftin' yonderly," Cassidy said. "My pardner here will ramrod the outfit from here on. His name is Quanah Camber. You fellers will take your fu'ther orders from him. He's got a letter to prove he's to be head man."

Luther watched while Cassidy took a sealed envelope from his wallet and handed it to Quanah Camber. With it he handed Quanah a law badge.

"Pin that on your undershirt, Quanah." Not even Slim Luther saw the badge or heard what the grizzled stock inspector said.

Quanah slid the law badge into his pocket but held the envelope in his hand.

"Hand over your credentials," Cassidy said, "to Slim Luther."

Quanah Camber handed the envelope to Luther. The lanky strawboss took it to the firelight, slit it open and read the contents of the letter.

Then he walked back to where Cassidy and Camber still sat their horses.

"It's your outfit from here on, Camber." Luther's flat-lipped grin never reached his eyes. They stayed cold and pale gray.

"Git your horse, Luther," said the grizzled stock inspector, "and ride along with me a ways. When I've picked up Dane

Loveless's sign you kin come back to camp."

He turned to Camber. "It's your outfit now, Quanah. Ramrod it like you owned it. So long—and good luck."

"So long," Quanah said.

Slim Luther walked over to where his saddle horse stood, bridle reins dropped. He picked up the reins and swung up into his saddle.

Barney Cassidy and Slim Luther rode off together and were swallowed up in the night.

QUANAH CAMBER dismounted and unsaddled his horse. One of the cowpunchers told him to tie his pony to the brush, that the nighthawk would be coming back to camp directly for his coffee bottle and the midnight lunch the cook was fixing. He said the nighthawk would take Quanah's horse out to the remuda.

Quanah should have been hungry. He piled grub on a tin plate and filled a big cup with strong black coffee and squatted down on his hunkers and ate. But the grub had no taste. And the inside of his belly was cold even when he'd swallowed the coffee. He knew that Barney Cassidy had intended going on alone from here. That he, Quanah, would be left in charge of this outfit. But there was a tenseness here that bothered him. And Cassidy had something bothering him. It had showed in his eyes. But perhaps it was because Loveless had coyoted before Barney got a chance to kill him.

Quanah never let his right hand get far away from his gun. From under the slanted brim of his hat he watched the cowpunchers squatted around smoking and watching him covertly as they augered back and forth. He didn't expect them to accept him, right off, and he took their wariness for granted. After all, he was a rank stranger. They were bound to be suspicious and even resentful about a stranger taking over the outfit and giving them orders.

But it was something else that was worrying them. It was worrying Quanah, too, and he was wishing he hadn't let Cassidy ride off with cold-eyed Slim Luther. Quanah didn't like those pale gray eyes of Luther's. Luther wasn't a man he could trust at first sight—or even on long acquaintance. Quanah had a notion Cassidy had sized up Luther the same way. Cassidy was a hard man to fool and he had acted like he savvied just exactly what he was doing. He could take care of his own hide. . . .

Quanah had a mouthful of grub and was washing it down with coffee when he heard the two shots—shots so close together they blended. Too close together to come from one gun.

Quanah dropped his plate; his gun came into his hand and he was on his feet. He stood there like a man at bay.

The others had their guns out, too. They were all tense, staring into the darkness, listening. The shots had come from perhaps half a mile away. From the direction in which Cassidy and Slim Luther had ridden.

"Keep your shirt on, mister," a puncher told Quanah Camber.

Quanah heard the sound of an approaching horseback er. He edged back from the firelight. Then horse and rider came into sight out of the night—Barney Cassidy.

The grizzled inspector was leading Luther's horse, its saddle empty.

His grin flattened. His eyes were slivers of green glass. When he spoke his voice was flat-toned, dangerous.

"I just killed Luther," Barney Cassidy said. Quanah Camber saw the nickel-plated law badge pinned to Barney's vest. "I killed him because he was a damned traitor. Anybody want to pick it up for him, me'n Quanah Camber will do our best to take yuh on."

A tough, grizzled, short-statured man with bowed legs stepped out. "I ain't askin' no questions, mister. That goes fer the rest of these boys. And what I say goes fer every man in the outfit. You killed a rattlesnake. We'd like a look at his rattles, that's all."

"His name was Slim Luther," said Cassidy. "But he ain't the man the Hat outfit sent to rep for 'em. He musta murdered the Hat rep there in the Hole-in-the-Wall. Then he taken the Hat rep's place. He had the right answers to them questions. The same as you fellows was taught the questions and answers. But he coulda learnt 'em, somehow. Dane Loveless fetched Luther along to ramrod this outfit in case somethin' come up and Loveless had to hightail it, like he done this evenin'. I got tipped off back along the trail that Luther

was nothin' less than Loveless's hired man.

"Them's the rattles cut off the tail of a dead rattlesnake named Slim Luther. Couple of you boys better take his bed tarp and a shovel and plant his carcass. You'll find it there on the trail. And while I'm takin' on a bait of grub you kin tell me'n Quanah Camber anything we need to know."

The tenseness was eased now, and so were the men's tongues. The grizzled cowhand with the bowed legs was the 79 outfit's rep. He said his name was Shorty Simms.

He said Dane Loveless had made Slim Luther strawboss but only the fact that they had their orders to keep out of a gun ruckus had prevented somebody from locking horns with Luther. And they had no actual proof Luther wasn't repping for the Hat.

Loveless, Simms said, had gotten more "superstitious" as the herd moved up the trail. Let a horsebacker show up on the skyline and Loveless would coyote. Then, that night or the next day, or whenever it was that Luther got word to Loveless that the law hadn't thrown in with the outfit, Loveless would show up and take over the ramrod job again. This wasn't the first time Loveless had sighted strangers and coyoted.

"For a tough gun-slinger," Simms spat disgustedly into the sagebrush smudge, "Loveless spooks easy."

"Because it pays him to run instead of stand his ground," said Cassidy. "Loveless is tough as a boot. Loveless won't sell out cheap when it comes the right time to show his toughness. You kin gamble on it."

Cassidy wolfed his grub. He drank six cups of the strong black coffee. Killing a man seemed to whet his appetite. He told Quanah about killing Luther.

"I never let him git in behind me; kept him alongside till he figgered he had the bulge. Then when he clawed for his gun I beat him to it. His bullet fanned my off ear."

BARNEY CASSIDY said Luther knew his number was up when he read the letter Barney had given Quanah. Barney had taken the letter out of the dead man's pocket. He showed it to Quanah; bloodstains were still damp on the paper. The letter said:

The man who hands you this is taking your job as trail boss and ramrod. His name is Quanah Camber and he can't be bought off or scared away. He is repping for the Montana Livestock Association. This pays you off.

(Signed)
BARNEY CASSIDY,
Chief Stock Inspector.

They were all looking at Quanah Camber now with respect. He folded the blood-spattered letter. Barney took it and tossed it on the red coals of the supper fire. It caught and burned to white ashes.

Cassidy dumped his empty cup and plate into the big battered dishpan and got to his feet.

"I'll cut down Dane Loveless where I find him," Barney said. "Time I got on his trail. If he cuts back on me and shows up to take over the outfit, it'll be your job to kill him, Quanah."

Camber nodded.

Cassidy unsaddled his horse and pulled Slim Luther's saddle off the big fresh gelding he'd ridden away from camp. The stock inspector saddled the horse and left his tied to the brush, along with Quanah's roan. He said it was about fifty miles to old Fort Musselshell Crossing, from where this camp was on Flatwillow Creek. And for Quanah to keep 'em moving along, and that Quanah wasn't to look for him till he showed up.

"I reckon," Cassidy grinned faintly at Shorty Simms, "it's you that's bin leavin' me them notes at the ranches along the way, keepin' me posted about Luther and Loveless. I'm obliged, Shorty."

Shorty shook his gray head. "Don't thank me, mister."

"Then which one of you fellers was it?"

They all shook their heads. Barney looked puzzled. He said somebody in this outfit was shore almighty bashful and let it go at that. He told Quanah so long again and rode away alone, whistling tunelessly through his teeth.

Barney Cassidy had been gone a half hour and Simms had broken the ice and the others thawed out and were accepting Camber, but not a man had even hinted that the killer of Slim Luther was Stock Inspector Barney Cassidy.

The nighthawk rode in to get his coffee bottle and the midnight lunch the cook had packed in a lard pail. He took Quanah's and Barney's horses with him when he rode

back to his remuda through the night.

Shorty Simms said Slim Luther had been listed for second guard. Quanah said he'd go on second guard. He saddled an extra night horse that had been tied up for Dane Loveless in case Loveless came back to camp.

Camber and Simms rode out to the herd to relieve the two men on first guard. When they took over they split up and rode in opposite directions around the bedded cattle. Suddenly Camber straightened in his saddle and listened.

From out of the night came the sound of a song. It was an old trail tune. Plaintive and sad and pinching a man's heart. Not so much the words of the song, but the clear tone of voice.

The singer came into sight at a running walk. The song ended as the rider pulled up. A big, white lop-sided moon had risen and its soft light showed the singer as small, slim. A hat was tilted back from curly red hair. There was a small nose, firm chin and a mouth that grinned.

"I'm the horse wrangler," the singer said. "Call me Red. I rode out to get a look at the new ramrod."

"That's me. I'm Quanah Camber. I didn't see you at camp."

"I went out with the remuda to show the nighthawk where the best feed was. I know you; I saw you stand up in that courtroom and tell that judge that you were proud because you were a half-breed. I saw you and another man ride outa town. Then I overtook this trail herd and the outfit was shorthanded for a horse wrangler and Shorty Simms talked Dane Loveless into givin' me the remuda. They told me at camp that your pardner killed Slim Luther. I'd like to spit on his grave. Are you actually, really proud your mother was a Cherokee squaw, that you're a half-breed and proud of it?"

"That's right, Red. Injun blood is proud blood. Honest and clean. Buckskin Camber was a good squawman. So was Barney Cassidy. And somewhere Cassidy's kid is tryin' to run away from somethin' she should be almighty proud and happy about. And I promised Barney that if ever I cut the sign of his quarter-breed daughter I'd try to make her understand how wrong she's bin. Goshamighty, Red! You're bawlin'! Let the tears come, pardner—it's that hard old lump inside that's commenced to thaw. . . ."

QUANAH CAMBER rode alongside and his arm went around the slim shoulders of Barney's daughter, Katie. "Us 'breeds," Quanah Camber said softly, "stick together, Katie. . . ."

"How—did you know . . . I was Katie?" Her hat had slid off and Quanah had caught it.

"I don't know," Quanah told her. "When I heard your song in the night, mebby. Or when I got a look at you. Anybody in the outfit know you're not a boy?"

"Luther, Loveless . . . and Shorty Simms knew—but they don't know I'm Barney Cassidy's daughter. I played Luther against Loveless. It wasn't too easy. I got 'em each jealous of the other. That way, neither of 'em would let the other one near me. And Shorty Simms was never too far away. I managed to pump a lot of information out of both of 'em. I'd tell Loveless what a tough hombre Luther claimed to be and Loveless said Slim was just a two-bit hired man. Loveless showed me how the brands were worked, once he got to bragging he spilled everything. I got enough on Dane Loveless to send him to the pen for cattle rustling and enough on both Loveless and Luther to hang 'em.

"I saw my dad there in the courtroom. Saw the two of you ride away from town. I knew the ranches and cow camps where he'd stop. And I left notes there for him to pick up. I printed the notes in block letters because I didn't want dad to recognize my handwriting. When you both rode up to camp I hid in the brush and watched and listened.

"When Dad rode off with Slim Luther I was scared—and helpless. If I showed myself or made a noise it would throw my dad off guard and Luther would kill him. All I could do was pray, and I'd forgotten how to pray. Then I heard the shots and saw Dad ride up and I wanted to quit the brush and run to him and tell him what a little fool I'd been. But I was scared that would spoil whatever it was Dad and you were planning. So I stayed bushed-up till he'd gone and then I rode out here. Tell me what you and Dad want me to do and I'll do it."

Katie Cassidy was dry-eyed now. She

pulled the old Stetson hat down on her cropped head.

"You any idea where I'd cut Dane Loveless' sign if I pulled out right now?" Quanah asked.

She nodded. "Whenever he pulled out, he'd tell me where to locate him when it was safe for him to come back to the outfit. He didn't trust Slim Luther. When he left camp this evening he said he'd be holed-up at an old cabin about five miles down the crick from camp. I'll go along with you, Quanah."

At first Quanah flatly refused to let her. She argued that if any man rode up alone Dane Loveless would bushwhack him.

"But if I go a little way ahead," she clinched her argument, "alone, singin' a song, he'll come out into the open. Then you can get a shot at him."

"Don't be so cold-blooded," Quanah told her.

"It's you or him, Quanah." Her green eyes were icy. "I don't want you killed."

"I let my dad ride on ahead on a false trail," she went on, "to keep him from being bushwhacked. Loveless brags about men he's killed and never gave 'em a chance to reach for a gun. If you don't kill Loveless, he'll murder you—and Barney Cassidy."

"I'll send Shorty Simms to camp to call the boys on third guard," Quanah Camber said. "When they git here, you and I'll pull out. I'll play it your way, Injun."

"Now," her eyes darkened, "you're showin' sense—Injun."

Quanah leaned from his saddle and kissed her. Her lips were warm, soft and clinging. Her arms went about his neck and love came swiftly there in the moonlight.

CHAPTER FOUR

The Killing of Dane Loveless

THE log cabin stood in the middle of a clearing. Its door was gone. There was no glass in its one window. Weeds grew rank on the sod roof. Inside Dane Loveless was waiting. His saddled horse staked out in behind the brush and tall willows along the creek bank. Nobody could cross that fifty yards of clearing without being a target.

The moonlight flooded the clearing. Inside the cabin, Dane Loveless sat with his back to the log wall, a saddle carbine across his lap. In his heart was something besides murder. He kept conjuring up the picture of a freckled face and mop of curly red hair —a slim girl in cowboy clothes. Tonight he'd tell her, when she rode up, that he had long ago guessed who she was. He'd sighted the law today. Two horsebackers. One might be Barney Cassidy and the other a deputy. Slim Luther had his orders to kill Cassidy on sight. Loveless had given Slim a description of the stock inspector. Now let the Red gal ride up. She might be a decoy; Barney Cassidy might be using his daughter to decoy Loveless back to camp.

But when Dane Loveless rode back to his outfit that Red gal would be his wife. There was the cowtown of Round-up not more than a few hours horseback ride from here. There'd be a parson at Round-up. And Stock Inspector Barney Cassidy would think twice before he tackled his own son-in-law. Red was crazy about him, Dane Loveless. Dane had never met the gal yet that didn't fall hard for him. Slim Luther's job was to kill Barney Cassidy. And if Slim killed Cassidy, that turned the trick. Loveless would kill Slim Luther. Or if Cassidy was holding up the herd here for a Winchester Law cut, then he'd be dealing with his own son-in-law.

Out of the night came the cowboy song. It made a man shiver, made his blood pound fast. Tonight Dane Loveless would put an end to Red's teasing and take her, even if he had to manhandle her rough, to Round-up, and a preacher.

Loveless was on his feet, his saddle gun gripped in both hands. The girl rode across the clearing. Her song broke off sharply as she reined up. There was a six-shooter in her hand. She was staring at the cabin like something had spooked her.

"Who are you?" Her voice sounded brittle. "Who are you? You in the cabin!" She whirled her horse.

"You can't trap me like that, Slim Luther!"

"Hold on, Red!"

Dane Loveless came out of the cabin. Damn the damned young red-headed little fool. But he was pleased because she thought it was Slim Luther in the cabin and she wasn't having anything to do with Slim.

Dane Loveless forgot caution. He moved out into the clearing and kept coming.

"Come back, Red. Can't you see? It's me! Dane Loveless! Come back here, you damned little fool!"

But the rider who spurred his horse out into the open wasn't Red.

"Drop your gun, Loveless!" the stranger barked. "I'm the Law!"

Loveless halted. He stood there, crouched a little. A shot from the brush sent a bullet whining so close to Loveless' head that it spoiled his aim and his shot went whining past Quanah Camber's head.

Camber twisted in his saddle, stood in his stirrups; the stock of his saddle carbine recoiled against his shoulder as he lined his sights and squeezed the trigger. His first shot hit Dane Loveless in the belly and Loveless doubled over and then went down on one knee, his carbine spitting fire.

Camber levered a fresh cartridge into the breech and fired again. He saw Loveless pitch forward on his head and he put two more .30-30 slugs in Loveless' motionless hulk. Then he rode up to where the dead renegade lay.

Beads of sweat glistened on Quanah's skin. His eyes were clouded. He had just killed his first man and he wasn't proud of it. He sat his horse and stared down at the dead rustler.

He hardly noticed Katie when she rode up until she reached out and touched his arm almost timidly. He turned and looked at her. She was pale.

"Get his tally book and wallet, Quanah." Her voice was an unsteady husky whisper. "Then let's get away from here, quick. I don't like it any more than you do."

Quanah forgot his own torn feelings. He put his arm around her and felt her shudder. That shot she had fired had saved his life. And she had done something that had taken far more courage and grit than most men brag about.

Quanah kissed her. Her lips were cold any dry. He told her to sit steady. He dismounted and went through the dead renegade's pockets. Found the tally book and some letters and a big thick wallet. He shoved them all into the pocket of his chaps and swung back into his saddle and they rode away from there without looking back at the bullet-riddled man.

Silence held them most of the way to camp. They rode with stirrups touching and he held onto her hand until it warmed and after a few miles the color came back into her face and she forced a faint smile. But tears dimmed her eyes and wet her thick black lashes when she blinked. Quanah reined up and her horse stopped. He took her in his arms and held her and she clung to him like a frightened child.

"It was him," Quanah was quoting her own words now, "or me. And he was gunnin' for Barney Cassidy. It had to happen like it did. You saved my life, little Injun. When this is all done and over, will you marry me? Two Injuns. . . ." And when she nodded he kissed her gently.

ON ANOTHER day, almost two weeks later, Quanah Camber and Shorty Simms pointed the trail herd down out of the badlands and onto water at the old Fort Musselshell Crossing just as the sun went down behind the badlands.

The place looked deserted. No sign of human life. Empty corrals. No smoke from the cabin chimney. No saddled horses at the hitchrack in front of the log cabin saloon. The barn door open to show empty stalls. The ferryboat tied up at the bank.

But that was what Camber expected. He called out to Simms and his voice was purposely loud.

"This is the end of the trail, Shorty. Take the rest of the boys back to camp. Tell the nighthawk to throw the remuda into the horse pasture and go on back to camp. Keep the horses you're ridin' and the pack mules. If you don't hear from me or I don't show up, head back down the trail we just come. You're all paid off. So long. And good luck!"

Because this was the way Quanah Camber had been told to play the game out. Drop the trail herd here at the old Fort Musselshell Crossing. Pay his men off and send them back to last night's camp at the head of the badlands.

Quanah Camber wasn't to be surprised if the place looked deserted. Marvin Tanner and his son Clint weren't taking any chances. Word had been sent to them that Loveless and Luther had been killed. They had been informed that a tough half-breed had killed and taken over the trail herd of stolen cattle. Quanah Camber had sent word to Marvin Tanner to have big money ready when he delivered the herd at Musselshell Crossing. He sent word to the Tan-

hers that he would be alone when he collected his money. Because he was a stranger in a strange land and playing for a South America stake and was taking no chances. That if he found any tough hombres waiting there to gun-trap him, he had a tough crew to back him. This was strictly between Marvin and Clint Tanner and Quanah Camber for a cash on the barrelhead deal for a drive of stolen cattle. Take it or leave it. And at the first sign of any treachery, hell would tear loose.

Marvin Tanner had sent back word by Shorty Simms, who had delivered Camber's message, that he, Tanner, and his son, Clint, would deal with Camber on exactly those terms. The money laid on the bar at Marvin Tanner's saloon. No questions asked or answered.

"Tell that Quanah Camber," old Marvin Tanner had sent back word by Shorty Simms, "that I'll buy him a drink of whiskey. Fer killin' off Dane Loveless. Loveless was gittin' too damned big fer his fancy britches!"

The sun was down and the short twilight thickening in the badlands. Quanah Camber watched Shorty Simms and his cowhands ride away and they were headed up the round-up road and back towards camp.

He had sent Katie to Chinook; told her to wait there until he got his job done and if his luck held out there would be a wedding.

She was gone when Barney Cassidy rode into camp a few nights ago. Barney knew about the killing of Dane Loveless. He had met Katie on the trail and it had been a meeting that Barney couldn't tell about without his voice choking in his corded throat.

The chief stock inspector had stayed a few hours, then pulled out.

"Tell your men they'll be bushwhacked on their way back to camp after you deliver your herd, Quanah. Tanner's tough cowhands will try to kill off every man in your outfit before they git back to camp."

"So we figured, Barney," Camber had replied quietly. "That's what Simms and his reps will be watchin' for. I don't reckon they'll lose out."

"Marvin Tanner and Clint will be there in the saloon. Marvin will have the money ready. He'll like as not lay it on the bar. And he'll buy you that drink of whiskey for riddin' him of Dane Loveless who was fixin' to kill Marvin and Clint Tanner and take over the Musselshell Crossin' outfit. Marvin Tanner will pay you cash. You write him out a bill-of-sale with the brands and tally in each iron. You sign it. Make Marvin Tanner sign it. We don't need Clint's name to it. Only that old he-wolf Marvin's signature."

"Then?"

"Then you'll drink on the deal. Clint will be standin' there in the doorway, I figger, to see that you don't walk out alive with that money. You take on Clint. I'll be there to pay off old Marvin Tanner. And that's as far as we kin figger it. From there on it's a gun ruckus gamble!"

QUANAH CAMBER rode alone to the hitchrack, got down and shoved open the door of the log cabin saloon.

It was shadowed, almost dark inside. Then a sulphur match burned dim blue and the lighted brass lamp on the end of the bar showed the white-maned, white-whiskered face of old Marvin Tanner. Tanner loomed behind his pine board bar.

"By the eternal hell, Quanah Camber," Tanner's whiskey voice had an ugly sound, "you got guts!"

Camber had to duck to keep from knocking his hat off as he stepped through the doorway.

"Keeps them drunk sons from ridin' into a man's saloon like it was a damned barn! Belly up to the bar, Quanah Camber. It's good likker. I'm buyin' you that drink. Fer killin' off that worthless Dane Loveless."

Quanah cut a quick look around. Save for tough old Marvin Tanner, the saloon was empty. He left the door ajar and walked to the bar. Tanner made no offer to shake hands. Neither did Quanah.

The old rascal set out a bottle and two clean glasses. They were as thick and big as water tumblers. He splashed whiskey into both glasses until the booze came nearly to the thick rims. His white-whiskered lips bared and crooked big yellow teeth showed like fangs.

Quanah's nerves were pulled taut as fiddle strings. His belly felt cold inside as he looked at Tanner. They were the coldest bleakest pair of eyes he had ever seen in a human skull.

"Where's that law badge Barney Cassidy give yuh, Quanah Camber?" The words came out with a chuckle that had the sound of a death rattle.

Quanah forced a faint grin, then took the stock inspector badge Cassidy had given him from his pocket. He pinned it on his blue flannel shirt.

"Gives a man somethin' purty to shoot at," Tanner cackled. "Hellamighty, mister, you and Cassidy was spotted plumb back yonder when you met at the barn down in Wyoming when you told that judge you was a damned half-breed and proud of it. Kill this big Injun, Clint, if he claws fer his gun." Tanner's eyes never left Quanah's.

"Don't fret about that, Pa."

Quanah turned his head. Clint Tanner stood just inside the doorway, a six-shooter in his hand.

"We out-foxed yuh, Injun." Clint grinned wickedly. "You obliged us when Cassidy killed off Slim Luther and you killed Loveless. Them Wyoming reps won't never reach camp alive. And we got Cassidy cut off at Muleshoe Bend. Pa said he owed you a drink fer killin' off Loveless. And that's all you'll git outa the Tanners fer them cattle you fetched us. It's good likker. Drink it down, Injun. It's give-away likker. Marvin Tanner don't sell booze to damned blanket gut-eatin' Injuns. I wish to hell you'd claw fer that gun. I'd be proud to kill a half-breed named Quanah Camber!"

Clint Tanner came in. He was half drunk and he lurched a little. He bulked big as a he-grizzly as he stood at the bar. His gun was prodding Quanah Camber in the belly. And he was cursing Quanah now in a thick voice. He called Camber all the rotten fighting names he could think of.

Quanah felt sick and cold and shaky inside. And the cold fury whitened the color of his lean face. Camber was a little scared.

The Tanners, father and son, were eyeing him narrowly, ready to kill him if he opened his mouth. He had the tumbler of whiskey gripped in his left hand so tight that his knuckles showed white. His eyes slid from old Marvin to Clint. Then he saw a shadow in the doorway. Barney Cassidy was dripping wet; there was a six-shooter in the inspector's hand.

"That'll do!"

Cassidy's voice cut through the foul-mouthed cursing.

Clint's head jerked around. Quanah slapped down the barrel of the cocked six-shooter jammed against his belly. The cocked gun exploded. Quanah threw the whiskey tumbler and it hit old Marvin between the eyes. Then Quanah's six-shooter was in his hand and he was thumbing back the hammer and pulling the trigger. He shot Clint in the belly. He felt the burning rip of a .45 slug as it slashed his saddle-muscled thigh. He and Clint stood not ten feet apart. Clint lurched against the bar. He had his gun gripped in both hands and his big, loose-lipped mouth was spewing blood. Quanah tilted the gun that he'd never lifted above the belt line and pulled the trigger. The heavy .45 slug went into Clint Tanner's cursing mouth, tearing away his teeth, tearing a hole in the back of his skull. His body slumped and he went down with a crash and lay on the dirty pine board floor.

STOCK Inspector Barney Cassidy stood hipshot in the doorway. He was shooting at old Marvin Tanner like a man target shooting.

The raw whiskey had blinded old Tanner. The gun in his hand was roaring, spitting flame, the slugs thudding into the log wall or whining out through the doorway.

BUY ALL THE SAVINGS BONDS YOU CAN!

Cassidy's bullets thudded into Tanner's bloated paunch. It seemed as though no human on earth could still stand on his feet gut-shot like that. But the white-whiskered old hellion did not go down—until Cassidy bored a hole in his low forehead and tore his skull apart.

The log cabin saloon was filled with the acrid fumes of black gunpowder. Its log walls seemed to throw back the echoes of the heavy guns long after the shooting stopped.

Quanah leaned against the bar to take the weight off his bullet-ripped leg.

"They got the Muleshoe Bend fenced off," Cassidy said. "I had to go around. Swum the Missouri River twice, as the sayin' goes, to git on the other side. That fetched me here the long way around. And from what I seen when I showed up, I cut 'er shore thin. Looks like you pulled up lame, son."

Barney Cassidy went in behind the bar and came back with a bottle and he and Quanah Camber drank raw whiskey from the bottle's neck. Then the grizzled stock inspector told Quanah to sit down in one of the big saloon armchairs. And he patched up that bullet scratch.

They heard the sound of firing back in the badlands. After a while the shooting stopped. They heard men coming on horseback. It was Shorty Simms and his Wyoming reps and they had jumped the bushwhackers, Shorty said, and it had been a massacre and they hadn't lost a man.

Then some of Barney Cassidy's deputies showed up. They had cut the barbed wire fence across the Muleshoe Bend and shot down the few tough gun guards the Tanners had there and come on.

But they had not come alone. Katie Cassidy had come with them. She was dripping wet because she had not waited for the ferryboat, like the deputies had, but had swum her horse across.

She was the one who dressed and bandaged the bullet rip in Quanah's thigh, then patched up the half dozen wounded reps who had come with Shorty Simms. They joshed her because they said they hadn't been fooled at all. That was why they'd kept their cussing clean all the way up the trail.

There was a man with Barney's deputies who did not pack a gun. He wore a rusty black coat and there was an old Bible in his coat-tail pocket. He was a circuit rider parson.

"Us Injuns," Katie smiled, "are supposed to be almighty patient. But it's the Cassidy Irish that went and fetched the sky pilot!"

"Buckskin Camber," said Barney Cassidy, "as I recollect, was an awful impatient man. So, like as not, Quanah woulda rode to Chinook in spite of that bullet-scratched laig."

* * *

They were married across the river, at Muleshoe ranch, in the log cabin where Katie had been born. And there they would spend their honeymoon. While Barney Cassidy paid off the Wyoming reps for their cattle with Tanner money he dug up from a trap-door hiding place under the back bar. And later, Barney said, when the bullet scratch healed, Quanah could help put the cattle in the old Muleshoe iron. And he was giving the Muleshoe brand and both ranches that straddled the Missouri River at the old Fort Musselshell Crossing, to Quanah Camber and his bride. And he was damned proud to do it.

Shorty Simms and most of the others were staying on. They were weary of that range war in Wyoming. And they liked working under Quanah Camber.

Quanah grinned and told Shorty Simms, who had been his best man at the wedding, not to gamble too heavy on him, Quanah, giving the orders.

"The way that little red-headed squaw of mine has commenced orderin' me around, just don't gamble on who'll be givin' them fu'ther orders, Shorty."

Katie, rigging up poles and lines and hooks to sit on the bank with Quanah and teach him how to catch catfish, smiled and wrinkled her short freckled nose. Her look was gentle.

"In any Injun camp," she said, "it's the big buck Injun that sits and smokes while his squaw does the work."

Quanah Camber reached out an arm and it went around her shoulders. "Proud to be a squaw?" he asked.

"Proud to be *your* squaw, Injun."

THE END

FRONTIERSMEN WHO MADE HISTORY

from the notebook of CEDRIC·W·WINDAS

JOHN GREGORY

With Georgia recently so much in the national spotlight over disputed governorships, it is interesting to remember the heroic part played by earlier men of that state in the building of the West. Georgians started the rush for Sutter's Creek in California; it was a red-headed Georgian, John Gregory, who put the State of Colorado on the map.

John left home to look for gold in British Columbia. However, a fight with river pirates who coveted the contents of John's canoe changed the fate of an empire, so to speak. He killed the pirates, but lost his canoe, so was left stranded in the desolate Pikes Peak country.

WINDAS 1947

In 1857, nearly 150,000 gold seekers journeyed to the region of Pike's Peak. They gathered barely a handful of the yellow metal among them.
Then Gregory, in 1859, fighting his way through bleak mountain passes to Clear Creek, made his lucky strike at Gregory Gulch, and the state of Colorado was born.

Until John came, the country had been variously known as Western Kansas, Jefferson Territory, etc. But in view of his amazing discovery, Congress came to life and officially named it Colorado.
John successfully defended his holdings against claim-jumpers and other bandits, and lived to enjoy his well deserved riches.

The kid's clawed hand quivered, hesitated.

KILLER OF THE HELL, NO!

By STONE CODY

JIM BLAINE took the last mouthful and looked up at the waitress. "Molly," he said, "that's about the best apple pie I ever tasted."

The waitress was buck-toothed, with a faint black mustache on her upper lip. One of her eyes looked inward while the other showed a tendency to look outward, but just now the expression on her face made her look almost pretty. Anybody would have thought she had cooked the pie herself.

"I'm glad you like it, Mr. Blaine," she breathed.

Old Buck Armbruster walked in, followed by his son Ben. Molly's expression changed, lost all its curious, blooming charm. Blaine, seeing it, had trouble keeping from grinning. The expression was now one of awed and scared respect. It made her look suddenly as ugly as she was.

a cat avoiding water, through the dust of the main drag to the Hell's No Pushover Saloon—commonly known as the Hell, no!"

At this seven o'clock week day hour the place was almost empty. Blaine nodded to Curly, the bartender, then saw Big-Mouth Varney and Chicken Seeley at the back of the dancehall. Big-mouth had his hands on her shoulders and Chicken was looking white under her rouge. Her eyes, as she tried to shrug Varney off, had a kind of panic in them.

The sight amazed Blaine. Chicken was just one of the dancehall girls. She should have been trying to entice Varney instead of the other way around. As Blaine watched, Varney swept her to him and kissed her. The girl gave a little muffled cry and fought free. Varney gave a short, thick laugh and went for her again. The girl's eyes were

Jim Blaine's notched gun-butt told him he was the faster man . . . But he knew also that he was committed to die before young Armbruster's slow-draw bullets . . . Because, even among those who wander in the dim badlands of Boothill, a welsher is damned to eternal exile. . . .

Old Buck Armbruster nodded to Blaine with grim distaste. Young Ben, behind him, gave out a haughty but somewhat more friendly greeting.

Molly put Blaine's coffee on the table so suddenly some of it spilled over; she hurried across to serve the Armbrusters.

Blaine drank the hot black brew with appreciation, slowly. Before him on the wall, a hand-painted, wavery mirror decorated with cactus and columbines, showed him the Armbrusters. It was apparent that harmony did not prevail between them. Old Buck looked flint-eyed and glowering. Young Ben's arrogance had slipped.

Blaine managed to suppress a smile. What the Armbrusters had on their minds was no business of his, and Sudden Jim Blaine, gambler, made almost a religion of minding his own business.

He finished his coffee, got up and went out. He stepped fastidiously off the boardwalk in front of the hotel and walked, like

panic-stricken. A drop of blood oozed from her lower lip and slid down to her small, quivering chin.

Blaine cursed disgustedly. He reached the pair just as Varney caught the girl again. His hand clamped the big cowman on the shoulder and turned him. "That'll be all of that," he said.

Varney's reaction was faster than Blaine expected. His feet steadied under him and his left fist hooked savagely. "You damn tinhorn!" he ripped out.

The blow caught Blaine nearly off-guard, but his own reaction was fast, too. His head slipped back and sideways and the punch, which damn well might have ripped his head off, caught him high and glancing on the cheek and knocked him down.

He was up instantly, like a scalded cat, missing the swing of Varney's boot. His left smashed the big man's eye. His right and left scored below the chestbone. Then he set himself and jammed his right to the

point of Varney's jaw, a blistering blow.

He saw Cherry Millay walking toward him with a blaze in her eyes but his attention was taken from her by a voice at his elbow.

"What's goin' on here, Blaine?"

It was Ben Armbruster. His voice had an odd jump of temper under it—something straining to be unleashed—temper too great for this occasion.

Blaine was too old a hand at voices—and at trouble—to ignore the warning. He saw Varney inert on the floor and he turned to face Armbruster.

Armbruster's tone raised Blaine's hackles. "I don't know that I have to explain myself to every duded-up cowpoke's son that breezes in here," he said deliberately. "If you're honin' for trouble cut loose your wolf!"

He could see the instant effect of his words and the quick, unreasonable wish to kill which looked out of his eyes. Ben Armbruster's gaze flinched, almost as though he had been unexpectedly struck at.

Cherry Millay's quick, soft voice sounded at his side. "Varney was being rough with Chicken, Ben," she said. "And he hit at Jim first."

Armbruster looked suddenly sullen. "Why didn't he say so, then?"

Cherry took his arm. "There's no reason for trouble. Come on, let's have a drink."

They turned away.

Blaine fought down the fury inside him. Cherry Millay was no dancehall girl. She was a singer who ruled the Hell, no! as though she owned it, and not without reason, since she was the attraction which drew men for a hundred miles around. And she was the one woman who made Jim Blaine's pulses jump and hammer as they never had in any high-stake game. This was Cherry Millay, who had come from nowhere to put a hell of longing in Jim Blaine's breast, and who openly preferred Ben Armbruster.

Jim motioned to Curly, and to Virge Slidell, the swamper, and pointed to Varney. "Throw him out," he said.

A soft hand was on his arm. "I—I'm so sorry, Jim," Chicken Seeley said. "I—he frightened me and then he—"

"Yeah, I saw, Chicken," Blaine cut her off. "It's all right. There's nothing to it." His voice managed a kind of irritated softness. His eyebrows were raised a little.

"He's really bad!" Chicken breathed. "I can't see how Mr. Armbruster keeps him on. If he knew—"

Blaine looked at her broodingly. "It's not any of our business, Chicken. You run along now and get yourself together."

HE KNEW though that there was something in what the girl said. Varney was old Buck Armbruster's foreman, and Armbruster's Lazy A was the big he-coon of the spreads for fifty miles around this town of Squawbead Flats. It was hard to understand why old Armbruster kept Varney on. But Varney was big and tough and there were no girls on the Lazy A, so. . . A boss had to make out with the men he believed knew their business. The thought reminded Blaine of Duckbill Schultz, who bossed the Hell, no! and he smiled thinly. Duckbill would not be pleased. So from here out it depended on whether Duckbill thought as much of Jim Blaine as Buck Armbruster apparently did of Varney.

Chicken put her arms around Blaine and kissed him passionately on the side of the neck. It was as high as she could reach.

He stared at her in amazement. Her eyes blazed back at him suddenly. "Oh, I know! You don't have to tell me. I'm a bad girl!" she cried. "But I'm not any worse than what *she* is. You can't see anybody but her, can you? We do what we do because we have to. But she—she's just after money."

Her fists hammered suddenly and passionately on his chest. "There isn't a girl in this place that wouldn't give her life—" she sobbed suddenly, "but you can't see anybody but her!" She turned away from him and ran for the back of the room, where the door led to the girls' quarters.

For an instant he had the strong desire to go after her and to explain. Explain what? He shrugged. Men had begun to drift in. It was time for him to set up his game.

He turned and found Cherry Millay standing in front of him. Her eyes blazed at him indignantly. "Did you have to be so brutal?" she snapped.

His mouth tightened. "Ruffle your friend Armbruster?" he inquired. "Maybe someday I'll apologize to him . . . maybe."

A flush came into her face. "You know what I mean?" she cried, and turned away.

He watched her walk—the swift, fluid, sensuous movement of her, and his lips tightened. He turned toward his table and opened his game.

Two men, who had been at the bar, turned and came toward the table. They had evidently been waiting for play to begin. Later, others drifted over. There were five besides Blaine when Ben Armbruster approached.

"Mind if I sit in?" His voice was cold, hostile.

Blaine nodded. "It's an open game."

His pulses stirred a little. Armbruster looked on the prod. Evidently he hadn't forgotten the moment when he had had to back down.

Blaine knew that Armbruster, spoiled son of a cattleman who had made maybe too much money and owned too much range, was not merely a rich man's weakling son. He was a kid with a wild, mean streak in him and a fast gun hand. He had already killed two men, under circumstances which made it a "fair fight" but which didn't arouse much admiration in Blaine's mind.

He wondered now if Armbruster had sat in with the idea of making trouble. He wondered, too, and the wonder was brief and unimportant to him, whether Ben Armbruster could shade his, Blaine's, draw. None of this, he told himself coldly, had anything to do with anything. It was his business merely to rod a game of poker.

The game had gone along in an ordinary way, but the stakes began to jump when Ben Armbruster sat in. He twice asked for a raise in limit and he crowded the play to the last inch.

As the game went on, Blaine began to sense that Armbruster's hostility to himself was merely incidental. The kid's mind was set on money, and set there with an intensity which showed.

Luck went against Armbruster and the corners of his mouth began to whiten. He set out to crowd his luck and, as nearly always happens, when a man begins to push bad luck, fate slaps him hard in the face. Armbruster was down to low chips when Blaine saw him palm a card.

For just an instant Blaine's body tensed. This was the moment when all his hatred and jealousy of this kid could go out and turn the game into a sudden deadly snarl of gunfire. He held himself in. He had to be a gambler. He had to keep his personal feelings out of it.

Yet, while he was telling himself that, he let the chance pass and knew that he had not been a gambler. If it had been any other man he would have called that play. But he had been soft because of his own feelings, had not only leaned over backwards but had leaned too far.

He waited now, cold. He knew it would happen again. He knew, too, that what he was about to do would ruin him with Cherry—spoil his chances with her for life. He hoped. . . But there was no use hoping.

His fingers shot out, twisted Armbruster's hand so that the palmed card showed uppermost.

"You're clumsy," he said quietly. "I let the first time go, but twice is too many. Better get smart if you're goin' to pull tricks like that in my game."

His left hand had been holding Armbruster's right. Now he released it.

The arrogance had gone out of the kid's face. His cheeks were flaming with the shamed rage of a man caught in thievery. His chair slammed away from his rising body, clattered on the floor.

"You damn, lyin' tinhorn!" he choked.

His hand clawed above the ivory-handled gun that rode his thigh.

Blaine sat quiet. He did not even lift his hand to the short gun which weighted the shoulder hideout under his coat. Let this ranny have every break that was coming to him. Only his eyes, gray and frozen, drilled into Armbruster's.

The kid's clawed hand quivered, hesitated, and Blaine saw the doubt and fear creep into his mind.

THERE was a storm of hammered heels on the floor and a flurry of rustling dresses. Cherry Millay flung herself on Ben Armbruster's gun hand, clung to it, pushed herself in front of him, as though to interpose her body between him and Blaine's bullet.

"No!" she cried. "No! Stop it, both of you. Jim Blaine, how dare you?"

Blaine sat, still motionless.

"Get out of the way, Cherry," Ben Armbruster said hoarsely. "No man can say that to me. Get away! You're makin' me look like I was hidin' behind a woman's

skirts. Damn it all, get away from me!"

"Aren't you?" Blaine drawled deliberately.

Armbruster broke off his feeble efforts to push Cherry aside. He went suddenly still.

A long moment, slow as a broken-backed snail, went by. Then Ben Armbruster's breath went out and in. "We can't fight now, tinhorn," he said. "Be out of town by sundown tomorrow—or I'll make you eat your lie."

"I'll be outside here at sundown tomorrow, four-flusher," Blaine said. "I'll have the card with me that I took out of your palm. If you can shoot fast enough, you can stick it down my throat—after I'm dead."

Armbruster's face paled but his voice was harsh, defiant. "That's good enough for me. Outside in front of here at sundown. I'll stick it down your throat, all right." He pulled loose from Cherry's grasp and stalked out.

Blaine gathered the cards in deliberate, steady fingers. "Gentlemen," he said quietly, "the game is still open."

Cherry looked at him a moment with blazing eyes and then walked toward the outer door. He knew what she would do. She would try to persuade Armbruster not to meet him tomorrow.

He had a momentary glimpse of Chicken Seeley looking at him with scared, understanding eyes, her cheeks pale under big blobs of rouge. He had a queer sense about her—as though she were a child, terrified and loyal and queerly virginal, and there was a quick suppressed impulse in him to go to her and comfort her.

He said quietly, "Openers, gentlemen?"

The game went on.

* * *

So did the evening. The fiddler and piano player played and the girls danced. He saw Chicken clasped in the arms of a burly man who looked like he might be a miner in from the far hills. The girl's fine brown hair floated out as though in a breeze, her painted cheek was crushed against the big man's shirt, and her small feet moved in time to her partner's heavy cavortings.

The sight, somehow, hurt him. Chicken was too young for the game she had bucked. He shrugged. He had seen more than one.

The dancers moved off the floor. There was a clatter of chairs and a scraping of them into tables and a buzz of talk and then sudden silence.

Blaine's belly muscles tensed. Then he heard the light, leisurely click of her heels and his heart recorded the provocative sway of her perfect hips, even before the hand-claps and the hoarse shouts of approval and welcome rang out.

He said evenly, "Cards, gentlemen." But nobody was listening to him. Then her voice rang out, low, husky, yet somehow brilliant. It tore at his heartstrings and caught and held fast to his breath. He sat immobile, feeling only his pulses throbbing in time to the rhythm of her voice.

Duckbill Schultz came in and the gaze he turned on Blaine was not friendly. Blaine began to grin to himself, but the grin faded with the last notes of the song, as the batwing doors slapped open and old Buck Armbruster stalked in. His bleak eyes sought Blaine's table and he hard-heeled over.

"I just come to tell you that you're through, tinhorn," he gritted. "You've sucked in your last kid. This ends it for you."

Blaine looked at him. "I hear you talk," he said narrow-eyed, "but so far you haven't said anything. I'm waiting."

"I'll make it plain to you," old Armbruster said grimly. "My kid's killin' you tomorrer. If it so happens you're still able to stand after he gits done with you, you can count on me to be right behind him. You'll have two of us to kill."

"It would be a double pleasure," Blaine said drily, "except that I don't take much to the idea of killin' old and slowed-up men. Can't you get some hand that'd stand more even with me?"

Buck Armbruster's face flushed. He waited a long moment before he spoke and then his voice was level and deadly. "Mebbe I've slowed up some," he said, "but I'm still not molasses. Put your first shot right between the horns, gambler. Anywhere else and I'll sink six slugs in you where they'll do hell the most good." He turned and walked out.

Duckbill Schultz came over and his eyes were hard. "I thought I'd hired a gambler," he said in his heavy, threatening voice.

"Looks like you did, Duckbill," Blaine grinned at him.

"I don't want no funny business," Duckbill grunted. "An' I didn't set out to bring in any tough hombres."

Blaine said soberly. "I'm a gambler. I run an honest game. It draws business to your deadfall. If you aren't satisfied. . .."

Schultz stared at him heavily a long moment. "Maybe I am," he growled, "maybe I ain't. Both of us will know at sundown tomorrow." He turned away.

BLAINE said evenly, "This is an interrupted game, gentlemen, but it's still open."

The red-faced cattleman on his right said, "I believe I've had enough for tonight."

The others had the same uneasy impulse to leave. Blaine cashed in their chips, saw them go and leaned back in his chair.

Chicken Seeley came up to him. Her cheeks were white under the paint but her eyes blazed.

"You—you fool!" she breathed. "You're tryin' to fight everybody because of that—that singing gold-digger. I thought a gambler would at least know what—what the score was."

In her fluffed dancing dress she looked like a small blue pullet who thought she was a rooster. Blaine thought he could see the hackles rise on her neck. He grinned.

"Now, now," he said gently.

Her mouth, that ordinarily looked tender and defenseless, screwed up into a tight knot. "There's hardly anybody," she said through her teeth, "but who knows Ben Armbruster is the man that held up the south stage with his old man's money on it—because he was in woman trouble and gamblin' trouble over to Wetrock. Varney found it out and he's been bleedin' him for it for a livin' ever since, threatening to tell his old man. But you got to tangle with him, and old Armbruster too—because you've fallen for that—that . . . oh!" Tears sprang to her eyes and she turned away.

Blaine sat as though turned to stone. Then something came surging up in him that was almost like a paean of joy. He had to meet the Armbrusters tomorrow. But now he had his out. Now he could tell Cherry.

He slammed out of his chair and strode through the door that led to the inner rooms where the girls and the other employees stayed. Cherry opened the door to his knock, her eyes hostile, her chest heaving.

He went in and closed the door behind him. "Cherry," he said, breathing heavily, "maybe I've made you sore but, but I love you, Cherry. You—you and I belong together."

The blaze in her eyes was enough to slam him back against the door. "What brought this on?" she asked dangerously.

"Listen," Blaine said, "I've been standin' back, lettin' you throw yourself away on that no-account kid, thinkin' it was your privilege. But now I don't have to. You're mine, Cherry. Stop bein' foolish. I got reason now to know he's no good."

He was aware vaguely that his fists were clenched at his sides, that he was breathing through his mouth, that he had no resemblance at all to Sudden Jim Blaine, the gambler.

"You're talkin' crazy," Cherry said.

Blaine caught her by the shoulders, drew her to him. His lips found hers savagely. She fought furiously away from him.

"You—you—" Her voice was choked with fury—"

"Listen, Cherry, I didn't—"

The flat of her hand smacked on his cheek like a pistol shot. The shock and sting of it jammed him into sobriety. After a long moment he said again, "I'm sorry." Then he opened the door behind him and went out.

In the bar, men were still bellied up to the thick rough boards behind which Curly dispensed his rotgut. A silence descended on the talk as Jim Blaine came in. He saw that Duckbill Schultz was there, talking with the crowd and that Duckbill was also silent, eyeing him heavily.

Blaine said, "Would anybody like a game?"

There was silence.

He turned to Schultz. "If it's all right with you, Duckbill," he said, "I think I'll get some sleep."

"Maybe you'll need it," Duckbill said contemptuously.

Blaine went to his hotel room and slept.

HE WAKED with the sun aslant through his window and knew at once that it was considerably before noon. He remembered now that he had gone to bed earlier than usual the night before. All the events of the evening prodded them-

selves before his inner eye, and for a reason which he could not make logical he felt like a drunk who has made a fool of himself.

He tried to put a finger on the feeling, and finally he knew. It was not because he had called young Armbruster, nor because old Buck had declared himself in. It was simply because he had made a damn fool of himself with Cherry. A man that would act like that with a girl. . . He began to wonder if he had been drinking, and ran over the evening and knew with a kind of despair that he had not had a drink. He groaned and got up and automatically began to pull on his clothes.

He had just finished with the wash-basin and was combing his wet hair when the knock came on his door.

"Yes?" he asked impatiently.

"Jim. Jim, it's me, Cherry!" The voice was a little muffled by the door, but there was that in the deep, husky tones which made Jim Blaine's nerves freeze and then jump frenziedly. He finished the last sliding flip of the comb and jumped to the door.

Her face had less make-up on it than he was accustomed to. The difference struck him all at once. She smiled at him gently. "May I come in, Jim?"

He saw she was dressed in street clothes —clothes a lady would wear. The slender waist and bust and the wide, flaring, heel-length skirt did things to him. She did not wait for him to answer but came in, closing the door behind her.

"Jim," she said, "I don't want you to fight Ben Armbruster. Will you give it up?"

He pulled in a long, hard breath. "I—I can't give it up, Cherry."

She came close to him. "Jim," she said softly, "I'm sorry for the way I was last night. I—you took me by surprise."

"I'm sorry, Cherry," Baine said miserably. "I was stupid."

"Not stupid," Cherry said gently. "Only too ardent. I'm not accustomed—" Her eyes dropped.

Blaine had an overwhelming impulse to sweep her into his arms. But he only said, a little hoarsely, "It's always been you, Cherry."

Her eyes swept up to him, at once yielding and blinding. "I don't want you to fight, Jim. Will you give it up?"

He looked at her, agony and indecision building up in him like a relentless wave.

"You're a brave man, Jim. You don't have to fear being called a coward. Just go away. Just give it up."

Blaine stammered, "A-and—and us?"

"We'll be together . . . later," she murmured.

His whole life rose up before him and fought against him, and for him.

He took her by her shoulders and said, "Cherry, we've got this chance. Stick by me. I can win today . . . at sundown. When I've won, we'll go away together and . . . and I'll do what you say—live the life you choose. Cherry! Cherry!"

She stiffened against him. "You won't give up this fight?"

"I can't."

"How dare you say you'll do what I want? You, you. . . "

He looked at her, suddenly steady. "It isn't for me, is it? It's for Armbruster."

She looked down for a long time and then looked up and cried, "Oh, Jim, can't you see how you've attracted me? But—but I'm going to marry Ben. My whole future—everything I've dreamed of—" She broke off, sobbing.

He stood, feeling the warmth of her shoulders under his hands and knowing her now for what she was. There was an agonized moment when he thought of taking her on her own terms, of having her his, even for an hour before he gave up his life and his code. Then he put her gently away from him.

"You go now," he said quietly.

She stared at him, and in the widening of her eyes was a kind of amazement because her body and mind had failed.

"I'll be there at sundown," he said. "There isn't anything on earth or in hell that could change my mind. You go on now."

Her full-lipped mouth hardened and her eyes were suddenly hating. She turned and flung open the door and went out.

Jim Blaine, gambler, knew that he had drawn a losing hand. He tried to figure the odds every way he could figure them. But in his heart he knew better. There wasn't any way he could win. He had drawn inside for the queen, and the queen had not shown up. What he had now was a busted straight.

He sat and thought long thoughts but in

the end the answer was the same. Jim Blaine, gambler, had no way to welsh. A man committed himself to a play, and the play turned out wrong. . . His shoulders had a quick involuntary shrug. He had bet on one Cherry Millay, and he had lost. Now he had a stacked deck in his hand and he could win, and Cherry Millay would lose, and if he, Jim Blaine won, he would lose. It would be a way of welshing and losing at the same time. With dishonor at the end.

Jim Blaine smiled thinly and lay down on his bed to wait for the coming of sunset. It amused him that he was doing the right thing. An empty belly made a faster and steadier gunhand. If he had been meaning to win instead of lose, he couldn't have done better. But he had already lost.

Well, a bet was a bet, and Jim Blaine was a gambling man.

He wondered a little, briefly, what it would feel like, what the shock and pain would be, and there was a regret in him that Ben Armbruster was not a better man. He might ham it up. But maybe not, too. He had killed two men. He wondered then, sardonically, about the happiness of those two, young Ben Armbruster and Cherry Millay. But that really didn't have anything to do with it. Jim Blaine had bet his hand, and lost.

The shadows in his room lengthened. . . .

HE GOT up finally and went out into the street. There were no more shadows then, only the faintly glowing, even light of sunset.

Chicken Seeley caught him by the arm. "You—you've got to listen to me," she said fiercely.

He looked down at her small, heart-shaped, pale face and realized in some absent quarter of his mind that she had on no paint and that she looked more than ever like a little girl.

He said, his mind on other things, "Later, honey. I'm busy now."

"No!" Her voice was desperate. "I've got to tell you. You think I'm a bad girl. Well, I'm not. I—I've been six months at being a dancehall girl—in six different deadfalls—because I never would let a man really touch me. I—I stalled. I tricked them. And when I had to I fought—and got fired. Please. You think we're all bad, even if you are so polite and gentle that every girl in the place loves you. You still think we're all bad." She was clinging to him, sobbing, shaking him. "But not one of them is bad. They're all *good*. I'm not better than they are but—but—nobody ever has touched me."

He stared at her, a little dazed. She cried out, shaking him again, hysterically. "Tough gambler. Killer. Sudden Jim Blaine. Does that make you tough enough to walk into a trap? What did she say to you—that Jezebel? Jim! Jim! Don't! Please don't."

Blaine took her gently by the arms and his eyes had a wistful warmth. "I got a hand to play out, Chicken," he said. "Good-luck to you." He put her aside and went on down the street.

Ben Armbruster was waiting for him in front of the saloon. Behind Ben, a little to one side, stood old Buck.

Blaine saw Duckbill Schultz standing in front of the saloon, saw Curly peering bug-eyed between the batwing doors. Across the street, her hands clenched about a velvet bag, stood Cherry Millay. He saw the pallor beneath the light rouge on her cheeks, a pallor that made the rouged spots stand out a little blue in the sunset glow. There was a bitterness in him because now he had to pay his bet. He walked on past her and came to a stop thirty feet from Ben Armbruster.

It was queer what went on in his mind during that walk; his thoughts were like heat lightning on a summer night.

He remembered how he had become a friend and pupil of Ace McGovern after his father had died. Ace McGovern. Gay, fearless, wise and true. Ace had taught him to be what he in his heart wanted to be—a gambler. Ace had taught him honesty, and Ace had taught him dishonesty. He had taught him how to see a cold-decker's ways and how to be swifter and subtler with his fingers than his adversary could be. And Ace had taught him the gambler's code—never welsh on a bet, even if the bet is one you made inside yourself!

And now Ace and Ace's code had killed him. He had no bitterness in that thought. A man had to lose sometime.

His lips drew up in a sudden crooked smile, because the heat lightning of his thoughts showed him an ironical thing. Ace

McGovern, his friend, was killing Jim Blaine but he, Jim Blaine, was killing the man who was to kill him. Young Ben Armbruster would kill Blaine and would thereafter have the reputation of being fast enough to kill Jim Blaine—worse still, he himself would believe that he was fast enough to kill Blaine. His death, therefore was certain. Somebody who wanted to prove himself fast would seek out Ben Armbruster. So, in giving Armbruster his life for the sake of a busted straight, Jim Blaine was dealing out death.

Jim Blaine said quietly, "Make it good, Armbruster. Slap leather and be fast!"

Ben Armbruster's face was white. His hand dipped.

Sudden Jim Blaine watched his draw with a kind of regret. He would have liked to be killed by a faster man. He schooled his right hand to be slow, yet not too slow to make the thing obvious. His palm met the smooth brown handle of his Colt, drew it, a smooth fraction of a second late.

Something smashed him hard in the back, whirling him. A split second afterward the flat snarl of a Winchester sounded in his ears. He whirled, falling, seeing the face of Varney in the alley behind, his big hand whipping the lever of the rifle.

Blaine's sixgun bucked against his palm and something happened to the center of Varney's head to make him dive face-forward out of the alleyway.

Colt-thunder hammered at Blaine's ears and lead ripped at his ear lobe and the top of his shoulder.

He whirled and shot Ben Armbruster squarely through the brisket.

LEAD RIPPED past him again and again and he saw out of the corner of his eye that Cherry Millay, murder-eyed, was leveling a small, nickel-plated revolver at him.

He thought: "You can't beat a stacked deck," and waited.

Cherry's gun whipped upward and she screamed. The flat report of the small gun mingled with the scream.

Blaine turned his eyes and saw Chicken Seeley with a toy pistol in her hand. She was yelling something incomprehensible and shooting again and again, but all the shots except that first one missed, which was strange because Cherry Millay was still on her feet, clutching at her shoulder.

Old Buck Armbruster stepped out into the street, his hard face gray. The shock of the Winchester slug was making Blaine a little dizzy but he could see well enough, and he gripped his gun a little tighter.

Buck Armbruster was empty-handed. He shook his head. "I'm not a dry-gulcher," he grated. "Put your iron away."

He bent down over his son, and when he straightened up twenty years had ravaged his face. He looked at Blaine and then at Big-mouth Varney, seeing how the back of his head was blown out, and then swiveled his eyes to Cherry Millay, who was sobbing now instead of screaming, and then he turned away with his shoulders sagging.

Jim Blaine struggled to his feet.

Chicken Seeley was in front of him. The small gun was still in her hands, but she was holding it against her breast as though it were the cross of a rosary.

"Jim," she said, tears running down her cheeks, "I'm sorry. She was shooting at you. I know you—liked her. I hated her and I wanted to kill her anyway. But now I don't, Jim. Please, please. . . ."

He reached out a finger and gently wiped her cheek.

"You're crying and it doesn't even make streaks on your face," he said. "You must have left off your makeup."

"Oh, Jim, please don't make fun of me. I—I'd do it again. I'd try to kill anyone who tried to hurt you."

Blaine swayed a little and caught himself. There was a hell of a roaring pain in his ribs and he felt good and dizzy. He put out his hands and put them on her shoulders, and all at once she was still and her eyes looked at him with a wild, sudden question in them.

"A gambler's life is a hell of a life," Blaine said. "First ups and then downs—and an awful lot of downs."

Her eyes blazed at him. "Do you think I care?" she cried. "Do you think I'd think any down was a down with you?"

"I think you're crazy, Chicken," Blaine said. "I think you're one of the foolish virgins. I don't think you've got any more sense than a chicken."

He pulled her to him and her arms went around him passionately and hurt the devil out of his ribs, but he didn't care. . . .

I stop an' they pull up, lookin' me over critical. "Mornin', gents!" I greet 'em, tryin' to act nonchalant.

TENSLEEP—DEACON OF DAMNATION!

Horse thief Tensleep Maxon figured he got religion of a sort in Hell Gulch where, to the sizzling choir music of pistol slugs, he herded three whang-leather deadfall jokers down the holy sawdust trail, straight toward a coffin-corral, where one empty pine box was specially reserved for a certain red-headed horse-loving fugitive....

By BART CASSIDY

FOR A matter of a week, ever since I hear that Ol' Ad Jones has gone to buckin' the Devil's cold deck, I've been honin' to look the ol' boy over an' spin a few windies with him. That's how-come me to be enterin' the mouth of Hell's Gulch, just as the last rays of the settin' sun fade from the high peaks. An' there, sure enough, stands a big sign.

PILGRIM
KEEP TO THE STRAIGHT AND NARROW PATH
YOU ARE ENTERING DEVIL'S DOMAIN
WOULD YOU SPEND ETERNITY WITH THE GODLESS?
ATTEND FREE CHURCH OF THE OPEN COW COUNTRY
SERVICES EVERY NIGHT — 8:00 TO 10:00
REV. AD JONES—PASTOR
ARP'S HALL—PLACID CITY
ALL WELCOME

I set Glory Hawss, readin' the thing forwards an' back, sorta tickled an' sorta thunderstruck, as the sayin' goes. Many a man's got religion; fact is, most of us do at some time or another. But Ad, of all men. Just about the coldest-hearted gambler Montana ever knowed, an' she knowed some stem-winders. I wasn't more'n a button of a bald-faced kid when I met Ad, in Landusky. He taken a likin' to me, why I dunno, an' offered to teach me all the tricks he knowed. Bein' at that age when something of that sort looks like the best kind of a education, I take him up, study an' practice hard. Even Ad, who was slow on the compliments, admitted I was his star pupil. An' now Ad's a preacher.

Reflectin' on the strange trails life can lead a man into, I head up into the slot that is called Hell's Gulch, an' not without cause. Floods, seventy-five foot high, sweep down the thing. The cliffs pinch in till they rub callouses on horse an' rider fool enough to take the narrow, avalanche-swept trail. But it represents a twenty-five mile saving an' has the added advantage of bein' poison to man-hunters, one uh which is, or should be, on my tail. Never mind why.

The trail climbs up outa the bottom an' the walls draw in to shut out the failin' light. It gets so narrow I can spit across. Nothin' but a stream of sky above, a stream of water in the willows below an' gloom ahead. But wait! I pull Glory to a stop. All busted up by the echoes, gunshots come rollin' down the gulch on the breeze. I set there, wonderin' what the hell, when suddenly there's a rattle of hoofbeats an' a rider comes poundin' down the trail, slingin' lead behind him as he faces back.

He never does see me as I take a swan dive off Glory, ketch onto a hunk uh buck brush an' dangle there as Glory an' horse an' rider pile up on the trail an' pitch over the brink, crashin' into the willow tops an' thuddin' into the crick bed below.

Holy cow! I let loose, hit the trail an' stand there peerin' down, whistlin' for Glory even as I know he musta busted three legs in the fall. An' just then another rider wheels around the corner, ridin' hell bent. There's a gun in his hand an' soon as he sees me there, he opens up. Wham! A slug burns past my ear. "Hey!" I holler. "Cut that out!" Wham! A bullet whips at my sleeve an' I flatten against the bank, jerkin' my equalizer.

By now, I can see his face, all screwed up with hate an' killin' rage. Something tells me I'm a dead pigeon if I don't do some pretty soon shootin'. My first cracked cap fetches him. He rears up in the stirrups, screamin' a choked curse, goes back over the rump of his pony an' crashes into the bottom. I holster my iron, hurl myself at the runnin' pony's bridle rein an' jerk into the saddle.

From the bottom comes the echo of swift hoofbeats an' I ketch a glimpse of the first gent racin' down the narrow watercourse—on Glory. Cripes! I jab home the spurs an' head down the trail to cut 'em off. But after about two jumps I know this hay bag ain't gonna ketch nothin', not even Glory's dust. At the mouth of the gulch I pull up, spewin' out plain an' fancy profanity. Yonder, dustin' through the dusk, is my Glory Hawss. Gone like the wind. An' me hamstrung for ten hours before I can even try to foller his tracks. It's hopeless. Damn near bawlin' with helplessness, I turn about an' take a slow pace up that windy draw. Hell's Gulch! I'll tell a man.

NEXT mornin' early, after a few hours curled up beside the trail, I ride out the upper end of the gulch into the broad, flat Diamond Valley. An' yonder, set in its cluster of timbered peaks, lies Placid City, wrapped in a gray cape of breakfast smoke. An' comin' to'rds me, not a quarter-mile away, is a knot of half a dozen riders, their ponies' legs flashin' in the early sun, little spurts of dust jettin' from under their hoofs. The squat-built man leadin' 'em carries a rifle across his saddle fork an' on his chest a star glitters. An' me too close to wheel an' make a run for it. Whee-ew!

Certain this is the outfit lookin' for me, I ride to'rds 'em with a froze grin, reconciled to the worst, as the feller said. I stop an' they pull up, lookin' me over critical. They're strangers to me, but their tempers ain't.

"Mornin', gents!" I greet 'em, tryin' to act nonchalant.

"Mornin'," grunts the sheriff, short. "Come up the gulch?"

"Yep."

"See anything of a couple oh hawssbackers, ridin' like hell was after 'em?"

"If I had," I lie, cheerful, "I wouldn't be here now. That trail ain't but one pony wide. Lose two, did you?"

"Two bad 'uns. Gallows bait, if I get the expected results from messages to neighborin' sheriffs." All the time he's lookin' me over with suspicious eyes, the look changin' to puzzlement when he eyeballs my pony. "You comin' in or passin' through?" he asks, pointed.

"Comin' in," I grin.

"Yeah?" He spits. "I'm lookin' for one comin', two leavin' an' keepin' a careful check on ever' man in the valley. You could be the man I'm expectin', only you ain't forkin' the right horse. Bin in Placid City lately, have you?"

"Never laid eyes on the place till a few minutes ago, Sheriff."

"What's yore name?"

"Name's Jones, Sheriff. Playful Jones, of the Montana Jones boys. My brothers is Sinful an' Helpful. Figgered to look over yore valley for opportunities."

"Such as what?" His eyes narrow.

"Gamblin', mebby. Cards."

"Hmm. You'll find the field crowded, Jones. I'm watchin' fer a thousand dollars on the hoof, name uh Tensleep Maxon. You could pass fer him all right if you was straddlin' a dapple gray. Yep, the horse is wrong." He scratches his head. "Damned if I haven't seen that cayuse somewheres. Ever hear of Tensleep?"

"Tensleep?" I look puzzled. "I know a feller name uh No-sleep Magee. Never slept a night in twenty year."

"That so?" The sheriff looked startled. "Musta got awful tired. What was it, insomnia?"

"No," I say, "No-sleep was night bouncer in a Landusky saloon. He done his sleepin' daytimes."

That raises a laugh, the sheriff joinin' in. "I stepped right into that 'un, Jones," an' I can see he sorta likes me. "Well, Placid's all yores as long as you behave yoreself. Take care of yoreself an' the statoots. Come on, boys."

They lope away into Hell's Gulch an' I continue on to'rds Placid City. I'm thinkin' about his interest in my pony, wonderin' what them two gents done to outrage the law. Hopin' mebby to learn who they are, I open the saddlebags slung behind the cantle. I run my fist into one an' pull out a package. Cripes! It's long, green foldin' money without a spot or a wrinkle on it. Crisp new bills. Tens, twenties an' century notes, crammed into them bags till they bulge. Thousands!

I feel no joy at bein' suddenly rich. Only scairt, after the real danger is past. Suppose the sheriff had thought to examine my bags. Gallows bait, he had said. Wheeew!

I stop a kid on a plow horse an' he points out the Five Finger Draws drainin' down into the valley. "The reverend," he says, his voice showin' his respect for Ol' Ad, "looks after a little iron in the Middle Finger Draw. Bout a mile up, on the left. You'll see his name on the mail box. If you wait till night, he'll be down town to preach."

I toss him two bits, veer off the road an' take the dusty road up Middle Finger Draw. Ad Jones is home, doctorin' the bruised frog of a good lookin' bay colt when I ride up. He lifts his head, drops the hoof an' leaps for me. He drags me off the pony, hugs me like I was his brother an' yanks me up on the porch of his small, comfortable house. There, in rockin' chairs, we set an' visit.

Ad's a heap thinner'n when I worked with him, an' the old go-to-hell look in his eyes is gone. He's gray as a badger; his face is lined an' tired-lookin', an' the's a gentleness about him that's as foreign as a Hottentot. We talk about the old gamblin' days, Ad a little ashamed of what he calls "my early sin." I'm a good listener as he tells the miracle of how he was converted by a street preacher in Great Falls, how he gave in to a gnawin' urge to preach, his hopes an' discouragements, defeats an' triumphs.

"When I came here, Tensleep," he says,

proud, "I found Placid City an utterly Godless town, sunk in a slough of sin. For a year I preached to empty seats, just a few hungry souls braving the scorn of the town to listen. But little by little, I've drawn them in, winning them from the jaws of the Devil. I've been wonderfully blessed, Tensleep. Every night I preach to a full house, without the challenge being weakened. Placid is still a hotbed of thieves, murderers and blasphemers. Now we've even developed counterfeiters who victimize us all. . ."

HIS VOICE fades out as my mind picks up that word. Counterfeiters! Boy, an' did they have me victimized for a little bit. Rich! That's a joke. Them packages that sent thrills an' chills along my backbone ain't worth cigarette papers. All they'd buy a feller would be a job braidin' hair ropes in the penitentiary. Gosh.

". . .it wasn't a hard decision, Tensleep," Ad is dronin' on. "Where else could I spend my life with greater chance for service. So I bought this little horse outfit. . ." he twists uncomfortable ". . . on tick, of course. I'm a poor man and wish nothing more than security. I guess it's the Lord's will to punish me for my lack of faith. It was a sinful thing, hoping to own this. Soon I must give it up."

"That's the trouble with religion," I say, scornful. "It takes all the fight out of a man. Why must you give it up? A small horse ranch should be a good deal for a feller who throws the Bible at folks, of nights. How-come?"

He looks sad, holdin' silent an' twiddlin' his thumbs. Then: "I was robbed the other night," he says, in a pityin' way for them that robbed him. "I sold some trained cutting horses to the XYZ Ranch. I had two thousand dollars on me an' was figgerin' to ride to Riverton next day to pay it in on my loan. Two men held me up at pistol point and took it away. Now I cannot make the payment and the bank will not renew my loan."

"Don't know who they were, huh?"

"Ye-e-es, I know who they were."

"Can't the sheriff help you?"

"I called it to his attention and he went with me to face these two men, two house gamblers in the Pillars Saloon, in Placid. They told him that I'm an old time card sharp, that despite my preaching against it, I have a secret passion for cards. They claimed I sat with them in a private game and lost the money. Said they could write to Malta, to Glasgow and Great Falls and get proof that I was a damned hypocrite. I couldn't deny it, so rather than have the faith of my flock weakened, I agreed to drop the whole matter. Sheriff Tedford's a good man and he'll not breathe a word of it. God's will be done." He bows his head, meek.

"In my religion," I snort, "God don't help nobody that don't make a fight for his rights. You used to say, Ad, that you'd done a good job of teaching me, made me one of the best at manipulatin' a deck. Bragged about it, in fact. Well, I ain't forgot anything you taught me, though I might be just a little bit rusty. I've a little money saved up and' I'm layin' it on the line against them two tinhorns, gettin' back what they stood you up for."

"No, no, no, Tensleep. Cards are things of the Devil. Gambling's an abomination unto the Lord. I—"

"I suppose the Lord beams on tinhorn gamblers that go around holdin' up honest men, eh? Don't make me sick, Ad. I'm ridin' in with you tonight. You're pointin' out them two men an' I'm promotin' myself a little game uh poker. Kinda hungry for a good game anyhow." An' I'm thinkin' of them packages of counterfeit money.

Ad takes most of the afternoon tryin' to show me the folly of my way. But his words fall on deaf ears, as the feller said. Seein' I'm just as stubborn as I used to be, he gives up, shows me his Arabian brood mares, his big stallion an' pasture of fine colts. A nice sight they are, kickin' up their heels an' racin' around with their tails stuck straight out. No wonder the bank wants the spread. Ad's got the world by the short hair, once he gets it paid for.

* * *

When we put up our horses in the Town Stables, Ad shows me where them tinhorns waited for him in a stall, stuck a gun in his ribs an' taken his wallet. His voice trembles as he tells it an' it trembles when we stand lookin' over the swing doors of the Pillars Saloon, him pointin' out the fancy-dressed pair whipsawin' three half-drunk cowpunchers. I shake Ad's hand.

"Go preach to yore flock, Ad," I tell

him, "knowin' that the Lord's on yore side in the clean business of raisin' colts. An' don't wait up for me. I may need all night to get the proper feel of the cards."

I stride into the Pillars like I own it, sluice a drink at the long bar an' ankle over to where them tinhorns are fleecin' the lambs. Every pocket I got is bulgin' with them crisp new bills, each one a ticket to the gallows if Sheriff Tedford happens to drop in an' recognize 'em. Or, equally as bad, if these gamblin' men get wise, raise a holler an' have me jerked up. It's the chance I gotta take to help a friend an'; even as I think it, I'm wonderin' how-come counterfeitin' has become a hangin' offense. Mebbyso the sheriff was layin' it on a bit thick.

"How's fer turnin' this chicken roost poker game into a gamble?" I blat, arrogant. "Or are you boys just killin' time?"

The two tinhorns look up, startled, an' it's the chance the all but busted cowpunchers need to stand up an' cash out. One of them gamblers, hatchet-faced, squirrel jawed Chick Allis, grins, showin' gold teeth. "Feel lucky, cowboy?"

"Rabbit foot lucky, gents," I brag, takin' one of the empty chairs.

"How you want it, brother?" asks chubby, overfed Flush Monroe.

"Stud horse. Twenty dollar ante an' a sky limit. I'm full uh good whiskey an' cravin' action."

"You'll get it, my friend." Allis starts countin' out chips. "How much to start off with?"

"To hell with counters," I yap, an' pile up about four inches of double sawbuck bills. "Me, I play better when I ain't lookin' over a wall of yore chips. Deal the cards."

It tickles their funny bone an' they laugh contented when I holler for a bottle. They send over to the safe for money an' we start bettin'. I prove to be clumsy with the cards all right, so I play 'er straight an' lose. But as deal follers deal, I feel the old magic come back an' take myself a few winnin's.

It's funny. Here's one game I don't care how much I lose. For whenever I win a pot, I carefully stack their flabby foldin' money in a pile I never bet off of. An' every now an' again, I take a chance an' fold up a slice of it an' stow it away. As the hands run, they're way ahead an' not so critical as if they was losin'. Far as I can see, they don't tumble to my sly exchange. Come midnight, I'm loser about two thousand dollars, but in my pockets is half that much of the pure McCoy.

AFTER THAT, as their appetites sharpen, the game quickens. The regular patrons, excited at first by the high stakes, tire an' pull out for their homes. By one o'clock all that's left in the saloon is a dozen or so hard-faced gents who crowd around our game. Bets grow bigger an' I'm gettin' the feel of the old tricks. Then I notice that when I win a big pot, the men lookin' on sorta draw in, scowlin'. An' then I know. The game is just a cover-up for what's due to be found, out in the back alley mebby, along about sun-up. This ain't just two crooked tinhorns. It's a gang whose business is robbery, murder an' a lot of other ugly things. Whee-ew!

By the use of all the old tricks Ad Jones taught me long ago, I'm able to win about one outa three pots. Which is plumb satisfactory. Little by little, I build up my pile of honest money. At three o'clock, it's around fifteen hundred. At four it's growed to eighteen hundred. At five, it's twenty-two hundred an' the first faint gray of dawn is beginning to filter in the windows. I've drunk an' smoked way too much an' I got a dark brown taste in my mouth. An' a skittish gnawin' at my nerves as I yawn an' stretch an' slide back my chair.

"I've had enough," I grin, risin' to my feet. "You boys is too tough for me. Reckon I must be five thousand dollars loser an' with them cattle to buy. . . ." I reach for my pile of counterfeit mazuma, just to try 'em out. A gent with an underslung jaw steps up from behind, jabbin' me in the shortribs with somethin' that feels like the hot end of a cutter.

"Leave it lay, brother," he growls, "an' shell out all you got on you."

This is for keeps an' no place fer a man with a weak stummick. I spin about, knock his gun hand aside and jerk the ol' equalizer—all in one muscular explosion. His slug drills past me an' my gun barks a split second later. I drop to one knee an' a swarm uh bullets pour over my head. Shootin' over my shoulder, I let daylight into Chick Allis. He yells an' pitches

across the table, upsettin' it. It all happens so fast it's hard to tell. . .in order.

The gang is scattered now, backin' away, tossin' lead at me like spokes runnin' to a hub. Somebody's shot out the hangin' lamp an' daylight ain't half made. Mebby that's what saves me. Mebby they're over anxious. Or mebby it's the luck of a horse —er—horse lover. Anyhow, I ain't touched yet as I set there on my knees, watchin' pudgy Flush Monroe close one eye an' aim with terrible intensity at my brisket. In his open eye a fierce light blazin'—a killer light, hot, savage, triumphant.

I snap a shot at him, without aimin'. My slug takes him in his open mouth. The second shot is unnecessary, but just the same I let him have it, mercilessly, as I wriggle cat-like to my feet. I throw two shots at the backin' gunhawks, doublin' one. Then I'm zig-zaggin' to'rds the door at a prideless run, skid through the swing doors with bullets clippin' out the louvres, leavin' behind me two motionless tinhorns, a lantern-jawed brute writhin' like a crippled snake an' a gunnie holdin' his belly an' makin' horrible sounds half way between a laugh an' a wail.

I plow across the walk, runnin' an' reloadin', leap into the street. From under a shadowy awning, a man steps out, wavin' a gun. "Stop comin', feller, or stop a bullet!"

It's Sheriff Tedford. I stop, lettin' him come on. "What the hell goes on in my town?" he blats. "Oh-ho, so it's you? What's all the shootin' fer? What's yore hurry, Jones?"

"They're too many for me, Sheriff. They tried to rob me."

"Who? Who's they?"

"Monroe, Allis an' their gang uh cutthroats. They hopped the wrong rattler."

"Them, eh?" Tedford spits his disgust. "Cuttin' some more fancy didoes, are they? Come on. We'll see about them."

He gives me a shove to'rd the Pillars. But me, I've got no yen tuh be around when he finds that counterfeit money. As he plows through the doors, bawlin' his name an' business, I dart down the walk, duck between buildings an' gallop along an alley and so into the stable, by the back door. My pony's saddled an' I fork him an' light a shuck gettin' outa Placid City. Hell, I thought placid means peaceful.

When I get to Ad's place, he's just gettin' up. An' he looks like he's had a long, hard night, all right. The older I get, the more I'm convinced worry is a worse curse to mankind than sin. He looks at me with eager, anxious eyes that give the lie to his declaration that he should be rightly punished by the Almighty for even desirin' a little horse spread. "How—how'd you come out, Tensleep?"

"I dropped a measly five thousand," I say, nonchalant. "Just as I'll likely drop any money I come into. Easy come, easy go, Ad. I been thinkin' as I rode out here; you might as well have what I've got left. It won't do me any good an' it'll save your outfit."

"God's will be done," he sighs, an' all the starch goes out of him. "I was hopin' you'd. . . ." He smiles pitiful, spreads his hands. "No matter. No, my friend, I can't take your money, thanks just the same."

I laugh at him, pull the legitimate foldin' money outa my pocket an' press it into his hands. "Twenty-two hundred, Ad. Take it to the bank after breakfast an' for the love of likker, take steps to see that nobody takes it away from you." An' I'm lookin' at the holstered pistol hangin' on the wall—a gun Ad knows how to use an' has used in the palmy days.

He shakes his head an' tears come into his eyes. He puts the money on the table, plumb overcome, an' turns to the stove to lay a fire an' start breakfast. With a condemnin' look at him, I put the money into a cookin' pot an' lay a lid over it, wringin' a pitiful smile from him. "I just can't do it, Tensleep. I have no right to it and I maybe never can pay it back."

"Call it pay for the schoolin' you gave me, Ad. Interest on your investment."

He's got no answer to that an' he's awful quiet while we eat. When I'm finished, I push back my chair an' roll a cigarette. Ad watches me with hungry eyes an' I can see smokin's another sin he's put behind him. I offer him the makin's an' he's shakin' his head when suddenly he stiffens, listenin'. "What's that?"

The sound of hoofbeats strikes into the cabin an' I jump up for a look out the window. An' there, ridin' into the yard with a grim look on his face, is Sheriff Tedford. Holy cow! He's suddenly remembered why my face is familiar. An' mebbyso

where he seen that pony tied to Ad's rack. Wow!

I WHIRL to the table an' before Ad's astonished eyes empty my pockets of the unused counterfeit money I've got on me. Then I pick up the saddle bags an' dump what is there onto the table. "Look, Ad," I blurt, "it's the sheriff. When he comes in, tell him I left this stuff with you to give to him. He'll be after me an' I'll need a pony. Got anything I can ride? Got anything that can outrun Tedford? I'll get him back to you directly if—"

All dejection leaves Ad. "That won't be necessary, Tensleep. My personal horse Hassan. He's in the stable. Throw my saddle on him. You've paid for him and he's yours, with my blessings." He grabs my hand, wringin' it fervent. "Now, go before Jim Tedford comes in. He's honest and nothing on earth can sway him from his duty. Good bye, son and, thanks."

I dart into the little storeroom that gives to the back door. I've hardly closed the door behind me when the sheriff knocks an' walks in the front.

"Mornin, Parson." Tedford's greeting is glum but respectful. "The feller ridin' that pony out yonder? He here?" Then: "Great sufferin' cripes! Where'd you get all the money? Hey! This is some of the Riverton Bank loot."

"Bank loot?" Ad's voice is shrill with astonishment. "You mean—"

Way the sheriff laughs, I know he's tickled. "Sa-a-ay, that cousin of yores is all right. He had a shootin' match in town this mornin', killed Allis an' Monroe an' perforated two more so bad they'll die. Damned good riddance. When I braced him, he said they was robbin' him. Looks like the shoe's on the other foot. I found five thousand of that bank loot on them rascals, an' this. . .fifteen, seventeen, twenty. . .yep, that accounts for all of it. The cashier was killed an' the bank offers a thousand dollars reward for the return of the money. Yore cousin gets it. Where's he at?"

"Why—er—Tensleep ain't my cousin, Sheriff. Just a friend that was stayin' with me . . . a bit of a visit. He's gone."

"Tensleep!" The sheriff bellers it, an' I can just see Ad's chagrin at havin' blurted out that slip of tongue. "Well, damn my eyes! Knowed his face was familiar, an' why not? I've studied it on dodgers a hundred times. Playful Jones, I'll tell a man. He shore put one over on me, Parson. A shore enough slick one, but you know I sorta like him. Well, as far as I'm concerned, he's Playful Jones. He's did the valley a big favor an' he's earned that reward money. But I'd still like to know where I've seen that blaze-faced dun he was a-forkin'."

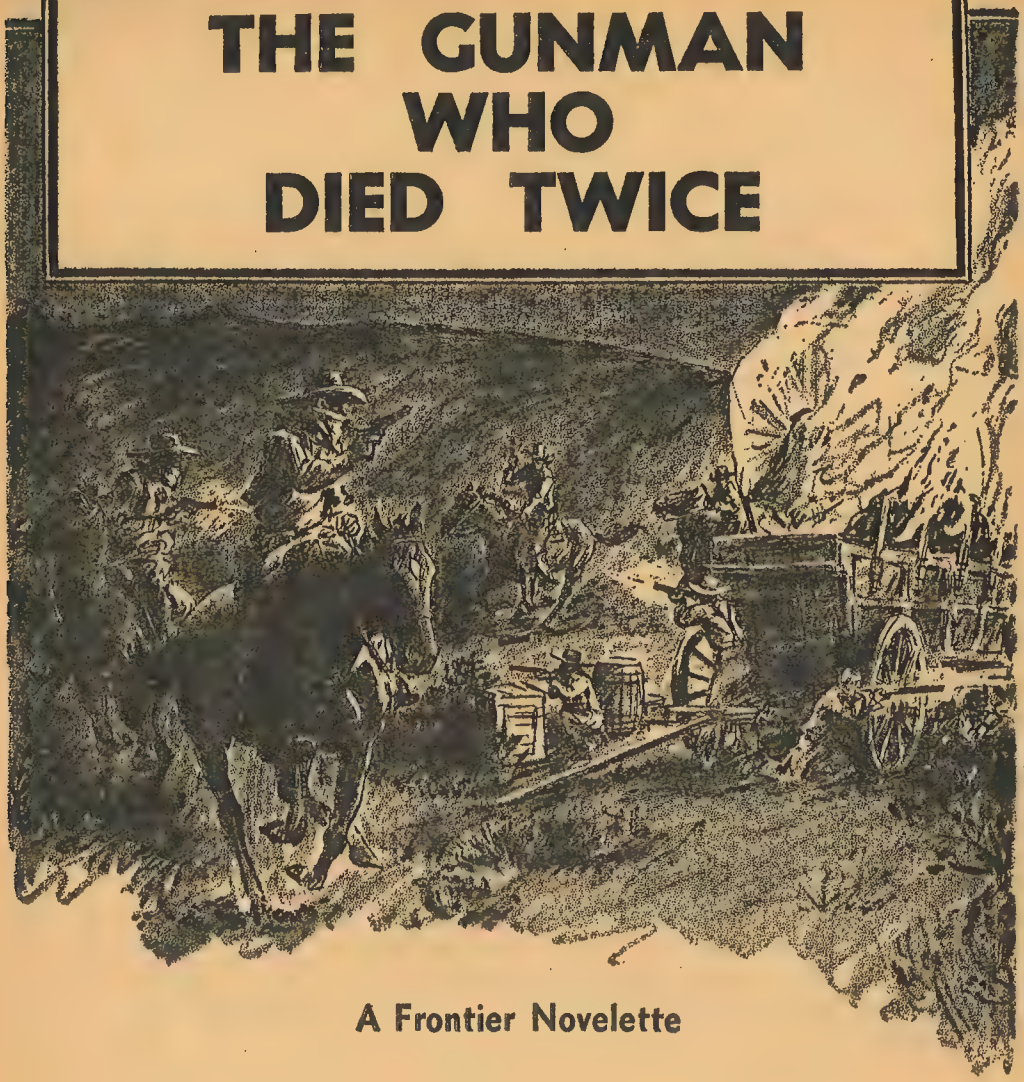
He's laughin' again as I let myself out the back an' scamper to the stable. But somehow I ain't feelin' as chipper as a feller should who's eligible for the blessin's of givin'. Counterfeit money, cripes! I had twenty-five thousand in my jeans an' never knowed it.

The horse, Hassan, greets me with a friendly little nicker. He's a deep bay, a trifle shorter coupled and chunkier than Glory, with slender legs, powerful hams an' shoulders an'—skip the details. He looks at me out of eyes soft an' friendly yet full of the devil. One look an' I know he's a prankster, a pony that will get the biggest kind of belly laugh out of dumpin' his rider. One more look an' I know I'm no longer a man afoot. Hassan's my horse, a worthy link in the chain of ponies that have served me with guts, heart an' loyal courage.

I screw the kak onto him, throw a leg across the cantle an' put him out the back. One lift of the rein an' he takes the five-foot corral fence like a bird, hittin' a rockin' chair run as he lands. His neck is arched beautiful an' his sweepin' tail is cuttin' rings as we pour down the crick to'rds Diamond Valley an' points south.

The Arabian's hoofs are makin' sweet music as he pounds down the road with an ease that hints at deep bottom an' long stayin' qualities. An' me, well, now that the sting of wrong guessin' is wearin' off, I'm feelin' better. Behind me I've left a few graves that don't do the country no harm. I've fixed an old friend so he'll be easier in his mind an' less embarrassed in his work of savin' souls. An' back yonder is a sheriff with blood in his veins, a sense of humor an' a friendly thought for a hunted horse—er—trader that put one over on him. Git along, Hassan!

THE GUNMAN WHO DIED TWICE



A Frontier Novelette

By

NORMAN A. FOX

Those shoe-string farmers of Tumbleweed, Montana, had a great need for Storekeeper Mack James, and he for them. But how could James side those honest colonists against the Colts, ropes and blazing embers of a cold-deck range tyrant, when James' own bullet-riddled body lay six feet under distant Wyoming's bloody soil?

Powder scorched McCord's cheek before he got his own gun going.

CHAPTER ONE

Second Chance

HARD riding fetched him to Buffalo at early dusk of a spring day, but he came into the Wyoming cowtown carefully and quietly, for they were finishing a war here in Johnson County, and Jim McCord had been lined up with the losing side. Buffalo could be a gun-trap for a trigger-quick Texican. But they were burying a man in Buffalo, or so the word went, and Jim McCord had come to ask a few discreet questions and then, perhaps, to stand by the grave and pay the proper respects. It was only fitting that a man should attend his own funeral.

The irony in that thought had kept McCord grinning across the miles, even on chilly mornings when newly-healed bullet wounds still gave him a bit of misery. But he didn't grin as he rode along Buffalo's main street, for he had a part to play here and he would have to play it carefully if he were to keep his head out of a noose. Remembering that, he wondered what perversity in his nature was driving him into a danger he might have easily side-stepped, but he had never been much of a hand at turning back once he'd set his mind to something. If they were burying Jim McCord in

Buffalo, then Jim McCord should be on hand.

The beard was some protection. He fingered it as he rode along; it was new enough to be itchy, and it made him look far older than a man of twenty-four should look. But it was more than the beard that had given him maturity; he'd crowded a lot of living into his span and he'd looked at death too often. Death was part and parcel of the trade he'd chosen to follow—the only trade he knew. But he wasn't wearing guns this evening, at least not out where they could be seen, not tied down to his thighs in the manner of the invading army that had come from Texas and Colorado to do the bidding of Wyoming's big cattlemen in a war to the death against the nester and the smaller stockraiser. His guns were tucked inside his shirt; and he didn't look like much of anything except, perhaps, some wandering saddle-bum, or a prospector come to town because he was out of salt and matches.

There was that scar, though, that tiny, crescent-shaped scar at the end of his left eyebrow. Damn a destiny that gave a man a mark that made him different from any other man! But the ones who might readily recognize that scar weren't the people of Buffalo but were of the other faction—the invading force now besieged at the T A ranch on Crazy Woman Creek and defending themselves to the death. McCord had gotten that much news out of a harried horseman who'd shared his fire and tobacco two mornings back. That, and the word that Jim McCord lay dead in Buffalo.

And so McCord was here now, looking for a corpse that bore his name, and that made his first chore the finding of an undertaker. There was a man who dealt in furniture and sold coffins as a sideline, and McCord spied his sign and read it, still sitting his saddle, and came down to a stand then, tall and lean and given to an unconscious grace. He found the man inside his establishment, and he said carefully, "I understand you got the burying of one of those Texans—a feller called McCord. He's here?"

The undertaker said absently, "McCord? McCord? Oh, yes, the ace of those Texas killers. You're just half an hour late. He's out at the cemetery. We've been burying night and day lately."

McCord might have asked the way to the cemetery, but he didn't, not until he was outside and could put his question to a loiterer. If you asked one man a lot of questions you made him suspicious; if you spread your questions out among a lot of men, each one of them forgot you afterward. You learned things like that when you worked at Jim McCord's trade.

The shadows were deep and long and purple when he rode to the cemetery, and he saw the wagon there, and the plain pine box in its bed, and the little, gnarled old man who wrestled with the coffin. McCord left his horse at the gate in the little picket fence and he gave the man a hand with the coffin, and when they'd set it beside the newly-dug grave, McCord said, "This one's McCord?"

The old man fished a pipe from the pocket of a gumbo-stained jumper and dug into it with a finger and loaded the pipe from a worn pouch. "Reckon," he said. "I haven't paid much mind to the names. But McCord was a salty one, I guess. Friend of your'n?"

"I've heard of him," McCord said. "Fancied I'd like a look at him. A good figure of a man?"

"You couldn't tell," the old one said. "Some of Arapahoe Brown's boys—them he organized to chase that Texas army plumb out of the country—sewed up this Jim McCord and another Texas feller in a cabin on Powder River. They wore that pair down slow, and then they rigged up a go-devil—a wagon piled high with baled hay that could be shoved up against the cabin and set on fire. I buried the other feller this afternoon. Considering what was left of them two after the cabin burned, you couldn't be rightly sure which was which. But they know that one of 'em was McCord because they saw him fetching a bucket of water into the cabin just before they opened up with their guns."

NOW a question had been answered that hadn't been asked, and Jim McCord knew how it was that Jim McCord was being buried this evening. It was a mistake to make the gods laugh! He'd been in that cabin, yes, and so had Ron McCallister, who'd signed on with him in Texas for this far-away war, and there'd been that third man, that nameless saddle-bum who'd come

to the cabin because he'd wanted a tight roof over his head with a spring storm shaping up. What was it they said about the innocent bystander who always got hurt?

That stranger had died early; poor chinking couldn't stop a stray bullet. Ron McCallister had lived until sundown, dying just as the besiegers had finished preparing their go-devil. Jim McCord had gotten out through the back window under cover of the first darkness, nicked and bleeding but still able to take care of himself. Later, he'd seen the fire from a distance, and then he'd let the night swallow him. He'd headed for the Big Horns and hidden out for a week, tending his wounds and letting his beard grow because he had no razor. Then he'd ridden out again, ridden on a horse he'd found at a ranch that was deserted because its men had gone to war, ridden to hear the news that he was dead and that his body had gone to Buffalo for burial.

It made a man want to laugh until the tears came. Those Wyoming fools hadn't known there were *three* men in that cabin to start with. They'd found two burned bodies and they'd thought that both Ron McCallister and Jim McCord were dead.

The old one's pipe had failed him. He put it back into his pocket and said, "Give me a hand with the ropes, will you?"

They got the ropes around the coffin and lowered it into the yawning hole, and thus it was that Jim McCord helped at his own burial.

The old one picked up a shovel and threw a few clods in upon the coffin. They rattled dismally, and he said, "I suppose it would be fitting if there was a prayer. But to me, death is a business and I leave the fancy trimmings to other folks. You got a prayer in you, mister?"

"To me," McCord said, "death is a business, too."

The old one shrugged. "He sowed and he reaped. That's Bible, so I guess it's a prayer."

The shudder was no intent of McCord's, and the feeling it gave him lanced deeply, and he said then, wanting to turn the talk to other things, "I've been up in the hills. What's the news, old-timer?"

"She's all over but the shouting," the old one said. "The war started out big, but it ended up a bust. I guess that's the way of most of man's dreaming. I don't know where your sympathy was, stranger, and it doesn't matter—the thing is done and over with. Here was the managers of those big Eastern-owned cattle outfits roundsiding in the club at Cheyenne and playing poker and not writing off their natural losses in their tally books because they didn't want their big bosses to know how poorly things were. But there had to be a showdown some day, so if they didn't have half the cattle they reported having, they took to blaming losses onto rustlers."

"This country is filling up with nesters and small operators," McCord said. "They *do* slow-elk a beef when they need meat."

"That made a good excuse for the big operators," the old one said. "That gave them the right, in their own minds, to hire Texas killers and bring an army into Wyoming. Can't you picture them Texas gunhands being hurried north on special trains? And them fool Eastern newspapers treating the matter like it was a bony-fide war, sending correspondents along with that kill-crazy bunch. Yeah, they had their day, but the countryside got plumb aroused when men started dying defending their own ranches against outsiders. Arapahoe Brown is the man who put an end to it. Trapped that Texican army at the T A on Crazy Woman, he did, and gave 'em a taste of their own medicine."

"I heard there was a siege out there," McCord said. "Talked to a Texan who was heading south—fast. It's over?"

"Governor Barber got wind of it. Burned the wires to Washington, he did, and a troop of cavalry come out from Fort McKinney and got a truce made. Them invaders was mighty glad to surrender and be moved to Fort McKinney. Now they're being taken to Cheyenne, I'm told. Like I said, she's all over but the shouting."

He heaved another shovelful of dirt upon the coffin. "Take this boy, here," he said. "He had one of two ways of ending up: a prisoner of the law, or a corpse in a box. He sowed and he reaped. Twenty-four or five years old, he was. Some wild Texican kid who got tired of riding for forty-a-month and beans and thought he'd live high and fast by hiring out his guns. And now he's dead, and there's nobody to play him music while he's laid away, or to say a prayer for him—just me that does a job

for the pay I get, and you who come because you had a bump of curiosity. Do you suppose he ever stopped to think that this was where the trail he'd taken would lead him?"

No, he'd never stopped to think of that. Jim McCord, alive by a freak of chance, could have spoken now for Jim McCord, dead and with the clods rattling atop his coffin. You didn't think of anything but the thrill of dicing with death, the quick and easy money and the stake you were building against a day when you would tire of your trade. You didn't know that some day you would stand in a cemetery, the only mourner at your own funeral, and that you would start thinking thoughts that could never leave you and would give you no rest. You didn't know that there'd be a moment like this when you would reflect that if the life you'd been living brought you to this kind of an end, forsaken and uncared for and planted in alien soil, then that life was not a good one.

"Old-timer," McCord said, "tell me this: Even if he'd wanted to, could he have changed? If he'd lived, could he have shaped his life into something better, something different?"

"The hell of it is," the old one said, "he would have had to see himself dead to have understood. And that couldn't be. So there wasn't a chance for him."

"I wonder," said Jim McCord, and he looked down at the coffin.

He turned then and went back toward the gate and his waiting horse, and he could feel the puzzled eyes of the old man upon him as he walked, and that reminded him that perhaps he'd talked too much, for there was still a danger here, and now the danger was even greater.

The Johnson County war was ended; the force with which he'd lined himself had gone down to defeat, and doubtless Jim McCord, alive, would be a man with a price on his head. But Jim McCord was buried, back there behind him. That was irony—not to make you laugh but to make you ponder.

And so Jim McCord swung up to saddle and put his back upon the place of his burial and was born again. The old man had been wrong about that one thing. Sometimes a man was given a second chance. McCord headed for Montana.

CHAPTER TWO

Fall of the Cards

THE town was called Tumbleweed, and a man could find a dozen like it in as many days' riding across the Montana range. With cattle upon a hundred hills, the prairie had sprouted towns like these—straggly and erratic and false-fronted, but Tumbleweed perched upon a creek's bank and had the blessing of shade trees; and in his first day there Jim McCord met a girl he liked and a man he loathed, and that made a difference to him. Because of either he should have ridden on; a girl could have no place in his new scheme of things—not yet—and the man had the makings of an enemy, and it was friends that the new McCord was seeking. But the cards fell otherwise.

He hit the town on a blazing summer day, and he saw the girl first. She was small and pert and pretty, and even the Montana sun hadn't faded the blueness of her eyes nor taken the luster from such of her brown curls as showed beneath her sombrero. She wore a divided riding skirt and a fringed, buckskin jacket, and she was having trouble tying a package to the saddle of a horse that had decided to be skittish.

McCord stepped down from his own saddle and said, "Let me help you, miss," and he soothed the horse first, which was what she should have done.

While he fastened the package, she gave him her frank appraisal, and she said, "You're a stranger. If you're looking for a riding job, you might ask the way to the Flying W. It's run by my father, Sam Wilton. I'm Mae Wilton. But you haven't got the look of a cowboy. What are you?"

He'd shaved the beard after he'd crossed the Wyoming line, and today he was glad of that. But he was still keeping his guns inside his shirt, and his clothes were the flotsam of a chancey trail—a knee-length plantation style coat, a pair of trousers tucked into scuffed boots, a sombrero that had lost its shape. "What are you?" she'd asked, and it was that old perverseness in him that made him grin and say, "I haven't rightly decided yet, miss."

He was sorry for that, instantly. Whatever the new Jim McCord was to be, he was not to be a man of mystery. "Call me a

man who is looking for a place to sink down roots," he said. "I hope we'll meet again, Miss Wilton."

She smiled. "I hope so, too."

He left his horse at the hitchrack she quitted, and he knocked the dust from his trousers with a swoop of his Stetson and crossed, then, to the nearest saloon; and that was the fall of the cards. He shouldered through the batwings and blinked in the semi-gloom and saw that the place was almost deserted at this hour. Only a few patrons sat listlessly at the gaming tables, and only one man stood at the bar—a big, beefy man who fingered a whiskey glass, not tasting from it but playing an aimless game of buildings rings within rings on the bar's wiped surface.

McCord took a stand beside him and said, "Whiskey," and when the drink was served, the beefy man said, "Let me pay. You're a stranger and we like to make strangers welcome in Tumbleweed. My name is Jess Sargent—Square S brand—and cows are my business. What's yours?"

And that, oddly, was when the hate was born.

It was made of nothing in Jess Sargent's gesture; a drink was a drink and one man bought and another. It was made of what this Jess Sargent was, big and arrogant and sure of himself, for Jim McCord had known a hundred Jess Sargents and they were always the kind who hired the guns of men like Jim McCord whenever a showdown shaped. And, looking at the man, McCord saw Sargent as a bridge to a past he had hoped to put behind him, and hated Sargent. Yet McCord said, "Thanks," and lifted the glass in salute. He had made a mistake out there on the street; he was not making another this soon.

"You're not a cowboy?" Sargent asked pointedly. He had full, rubbery lips and a broad face, given to floridness, and he oiled each word before he spoke it.

"Call me a man who is looking for a place to sink down roots," McCord said, then hesitated. "The name is James—Mack James."

"A Texan, by your drawl," Sargent judged. "Know anything about storekeeping?"

McCord smiled. Storekeeping? You bought things and sold them at a profit. You learned your customers' needs and stocked accordingly. You kept a full cracker barrel and a warm stove, and you sunned yourself on your own front porch on dull days. "Yes," he said, "I know something about storekeeping."

"Charley!" Sargent bawled. "Charley Weaver!"

A little man, gray and stooped and mousey, detached himself from a gaming table where he'd been laying out a spiritless game of solitaire and came toward the bar.

Sargent said, "Meet Charles Weaver, James. Thirty years ago something managed to get him out of Indiana, but we never got Indiana out of Charley. He wants to go back. Charley, Mr. James might be interested in buying your store."

"That so?" Weaver asked.

Around McCord's middle, next to the skin, was his money belt, and in it were the savings of five years at the gunman's trade, the stake he'd built against the day when he would try to settle down. Now there was a decision to be made, and there was the girl, Mae Wilton, to remember, and this man, Jess Sargent, but there would be Jess Sargents in all the towns. "Yes, it's so," McCord said. "Let's go have a look at the store."

AND thus Jim McCord, who'd turned into Mack James, came to settle in Tumbleweed, for, before that day was done, money had changed hands, a down payment had been made and arrangements put in order for other payments to go to Indiana, and Charley Weaver was hiring a horse to carry him overland to the railroad that ran toward the east. And Jim McCord, who knew no more about storekeeping than a steer knows about square-dancing, was the new proprietor of Tumbleweed's only mercantile.

He grinned about that in the darkness of his quarters over the store that night, yet such was the way he had wanted his new life to be—an exact opposite to everything he had known. If Jim McCord was dead, then Jim McCord must stay dead, both because Mack James wanted it so and because Wyoming law might start looking for him if the truth were known. He stowed his guns away in a bureau drawer that night, and, for the first time, felt that he was really born anew.

But that was only the beginning of a

studious attempt to erase Jim McCord. Once he'd favored fooforaw clothes and fancy riding gear. Now he took to wearing black suits and string ties, but he kept his horse and rode whenever time permitted. He read much and limited himself to one drink at sundown and kept quiet when he was in the saloons, always listening and learning, always striving to make himself a part of Tumbleweed. The store prospered; this was cow country, a land of big ranches, and Jess Sargent was his biggest customer. The Square S wagon was to be found at the loading platform behind the store at least once a week, and if Sargent was blatant in his demands and expected to be served first, Mack James curbed his temper and found this easier to do each day.

There was a debating society in Tumbleweed, meeting weekly at the town hall, and McCord went to it because he discovered that Mae Wilton attended regularly. Sometimes she rode in from the Flying W with her father, old Sam Wilton, a grizzled cattleman who was prone to fall asleep before the meeting was over, unless the discussion was particularly spirited. Jess Sargent came too; it was the man's way to take part in anything that was in the public eye, and when it came to debating he could always carry an argument by force if logic failed. At first Mack James mostly listened at these sessions; later he found it in himself to stand on his feet and talk like the others. His had been a taciturn trade, yet he had a way with words. Especially when Mae was there to listen.

Sometimes she stayed overnight with friends in town, and on one such night McCord walked her to the gate of a cottage on the town's outskirts, and they stood there with the moonlight filtering through the cottonwoods to lay a lacy pattern upon her face, and he said then, softly, "Mae . . ."

"Yes?" she said.

"The day I first met you, something passed between us," he said. "No, nothing of talk or of action, something that I could feel and knew that I would feel when the time came. I suppose that for every man there is the one girl who can do that. Will you marry me, Mae?"

He stood then aghast at his own words; not because of what he had proposed—the store was prospering and already he was fashioning a place for himself here—but because his way just now had been the old way, the way of Jim McCord, to reach out and try to seize whatever it was that he wanted. How did you keep a man dead, even after he was buried? He said then, quickly, "Yes, I know you haven't had time to know me, not really. Don't answer me tonight. Just think about it. That's all. Just think about it."

"I will," she said and fled into the house.

HE SAT up late in his quarters that night, unable to hold his attention to a printed page, and named himself several brands of fool. He had asked her to marry him, and that had been no intent of his; the words had come tumbling out. Yet by what right had he made his proposal? She was too good for the Jim McCords of the world, yet he'd thought that in just a few short weeks Jim McCord could be driven out of him. It would take more living than this to fashion a Mack James who was worthy of her. Yet now he'd gotten a new incentive to rid himself of what he'd been, and that incentive would drive him even harder in the days to come.

He rearranged the store the next day and dreamed dreams of enlarging it. He took to talking more seriously to the transient drummers who came to sell him wares; he gave up the sundown drink and had less time for riding. He saw her again, of course; he still attended the debating society and on nights when she stayed in town she let him walk her to that distant gate. They never spoke again of that thing he had mentioned that one night; her answer would come when she was ready, and meanwhile he was readying himself for it. That was as it should be.

And that was how it was through all the long, hot summer; the days chased each other into oblivion, and Mack James was becoming more accepted, and there was a mug with his name upon it in the town barber shop, and men spoke to him of more than the weather. Wyoming had grown far away, and even the news seemed remote and less able to touch him—the news that legal proceedings were dragging along but that no court action had yet been taken against the army that had invaded Wyoming, or against the big interests who had fetched that army.

He had fitted into a new life and loved

the serenity of it; he marveled now at the recklessness of other days when dicing with death had been like wine to him; he was content to spend the rest of his years as the storekeeper of Tumbleweed. Even Jess Sargent no longer annoyed him as the man had that first day. You merely stopped your ears to Sargent's blatancy when you were in his presence and otherwise you pretended he didn't exist.

No, nothing could change this new way, this good way—or so Mack James thought. Then there came a golden autumn morning when three wagons rolled along the main street of Tumbleweed and on through, following Antler Creek toward its source—three wagons loaded high with household furnishings and bedding, with linsey-clad, bearded men at the reins and bonneted women sitting beside them and ragged children peering from beneath canvas tilts. Mack James saw them from the porch of the store where he stood leaning upon a broom, saw them without the sight making any real impression on him. How was a man to know that such a thing as this could again change his life? Three wagons . . . three families . . . nesters . . .

That, too, was the fall of the cards.

CHAPTER THREE

No Choice

IT WAS Jess Sargent who called a meeting and it was held within the week. The word went out that Jess Sargent had something to say to all the stockmen of the Tumbleweed country, and to the townsmen as well, so McCord was there when the group assembled in the town hall. He took a quiet, unobtrusive stand to the back of the jammed room, arriving just as Sargent strode out upon the platform. Sargent spoke bluntly and to the point; this was no debating society oration where a man spoke only to make a show of words.

"Three sod-busting families have settled on upper Antler Creek, on acreage I've always called my own," Sargent said. "I've got all of you here to ask you what you aim to do about it."

Just like that—and McCord stirred, remembering his first estimate of Sargent and sensing here an old, unchanging pattern.

Sam Wilton had come in from the Flying W, and Mae was with him. Wilton stood up and said quietly, "If it's your land, it's your problem, ain't it, Jess? We've all known that we had two choices: to homestead our own land by proxy, using our cowhands to help do the job, or to fight off any nesters that came. You've got ten men in your crew. They should be able to handle three nester families without help."

Sargent colored, and anger put a more violent blatancy into his voice. "Sure I can handle them," he shouted. "But the point is that it ain't my problem alone. It's the affair of every man here. Three families make no never mind. I can spare that much land, so could any of you. But if there's three this season and they're let stay, there'll be thirty-three next spring. We can't have barbed wire strung across the range. That's why we've got to stand together against them. You cattlemen shouldn't have to be told why. And you townsmen have got something to think about, too. Tumbleweed has prospered and grown on cow country trade. Will it do as well if the sod-busters push us out and it becomes a granger town? Think of that, you businessmen!"

Sam Wilton was still on his feet. "Putting it that way puts a different light on it, Jess," he admitted. "What's one cattleman's fight is another's. But this ain't Texas, and it ain't 1870. Just what do you figger we're to do about those nesters?"

Flashily-dressed, big-bellied Cory Timberline came erect. Timberline owned the saloon where Sargent's crew spent its time and its money on town nights, and there was a shade of deference in the nod the man gave Sargent. "I'm for you, Jess," Timberline said. "I think I speak for all the men of Tumbleweed. Nesters aren't a monied breed. It doesn't take much looking to show us which side our bread is buttered on in this matter. We'll help you fight them, and maybe we can do more fighting than you think. Supposing we refuse their money in Tumbleweed? Supposing we refuse them any credit? A closed town as far as they're concerned. Winter's coming on and they'll need the things they'll have to buy here. But it won't be the cold that will freeze them out. It will be us."

Sargent grinned, then frowned. "Thanks, Cory," he said. "I appreciate your spirit. But your scheme won't work. To be a sod-

buster you have to be self-sufficient. You have to know how to live off a handful of flour and make one pair of pants last you the year around. If you close Tumbleweed to them, they'll just stiffen their backs and hang on anyway. But go ahead and close the town. That'll show 'em how this range feels about nesters. But the cattlemen will have to make the real fight. Wilton was right when he said this wasn't Texas, and it isn't twenty years ago, either. None of us wants to stand in a court of law later on to account for why a sod-buster's shack went up in flames one night. So we'll play it smart. We'll hire outsiders to do the night-riding, imported men who'll put the fear of God in those stubble-jumpers. I'm willing to put up one thousand dollars right now for as many guns as the money will buy. How about the rest of you?"

"No!" Jim McCord shouted and was suddenly elbowing his way forward to where every man could see him.

Jess Sargent regarded him first in astonishment and then in cynical amusement. "The thought of guns sickens you, Mr. James?" he asked.

"The thought of guns will sicken all of you before you're through," McCord said. "Man, can't you see that the thing you propose is the very thing that was tried in Johnson County, Wyoming, and failed? There you had the big cattlemen bringing in an invasion army, and that army went down to defeat. Why? For a good many reasons. Do you want to hear them?"

"You were a stranger, and you rode in from the south, or so I was told," Sargent said slowly. "Maybe you know more about Johnson County than anybody here. Go ahead and make your speech, James."

THAT was where some last shred of good sense might have stilled Jim McCord's tongue, for if he were to continue to be part of this town it was not good that he should set himself up against the combined will of the community. And Cory Timberline had spoken for the other businessmen and no one had arisen to dispute him. But to each man there are the things that are vital to him, and when you touch upon them he has to make his stand. He'd never been much of a hand at turning back once he'd set his mind to something. That was Jim McCord's trait and a change of clothes and a change of trades hadn't stamped it out of him.

"They were living in the past, those Wyoming cattlemen," McCord said. "They hadn't woke up to the fact that their kind no longer ruled the West. They used the law of the gun to have their own way, and they failed, and, in the end, their forces found themselves cooped up at the T A ranch on Crazy Woman Creek with an army bigger than theirs keeping them sewed up. They failed because when you ride with long spurs the little people get fed up with you and give you a taste of your own medicine. But mostly they failed because they were trying to do the impossible—they were trying to turn the clock back. It can't be done, Sargent. Will you learn that any other way but the hard way? You'll do better to be neighborly to those nesters, because they're here to stay—if not them, then the ones that will come on their heels."

The silence was clamorous when he finished; he could hear the restless creak of benches, the scrape of bootsoles, the heavy breathing of the packed men. He stood then, wondering what manner of fool he'd made of himself, wondering if he'd have to be moving on before sundown, and not caring much until he found Mae's eyes upon him.

Then Sam Wilton said, "We can't overlook what this boy's just told us. Hastiness never gets a man very far. I say we should sleep on this a few nights before we plan any action. And I'm going home."

That was how the meeting was adjourned.

But the echoes of it were to linger in Tumbleweed's streets in the days to come. McCord went about his business with the fire dead in him that had burned so brightly at the meeting; he had thought the thing out since and wondered why it should have mattered to him what means were taken to evict those nester families. He had himself to be concerned with, and his job was to stamp out the man he'd once been, to fit himself into this town and be a part of it, to prosper and prepare for the answer he hoped that Mae would some day give him. For the sake of a cause that was no concern of his, he'd let himself be stampeded into standing alone against the town and the range. Yet Sam Wilton had seen sense in his words, and there was consolation in that.

And others must have seen sense, too, for by the time a week had passed McCord was sure there was no great difference in the attitude of the townsmen toward him. If anything, they were a shade more affable, a shade more respectful. He heard the talk: those nesters were living in their wagons and were hastily building shacks along upper Antler Creek. Jade Ringo, Sargent's foreman, had paid them a look-see visit, gotten truculent, and had been ordered away over the barrel of a shotgun. Some told that tale with a frown, some with a grin. But nothing was changed, really.

And so the days became their old, slow routine, and McCord began to have the feeling of a man who has successfully weathered a storm. And then he looked up from his counter one day to find a tall, gaunt, overall-clad man patiently awaiting his attention. This man said, "If you've got barbed wire for sale, I can use as many spools as you can sell."

McCord said, "You're one of those new people on Antler Creek."

"My name is Ab Gunderson," the nester said. "Have you got any barbed wire? We want our places fenced before the winter comes. We'll need those fences up when we plant our spring crops."

"There's a dozen spools of wire in the shed," McCord admitted. "The fellow I bought this place from stocked it, though why I don't know. The cattlemen hereabouts operate on open range, using line riders and cutting each other's herds at round-up time for strays."

"Maybe," said Ab Gunderson, "he figgered fellers like us would be coming someday. How much for the wire?"

He dug a thin roll of currency out of his overalls pocket, and McCord said, "The price is three forty-five a hundred pounds, but I didn't say I'd sell. You asked me a fair question; you asked if I had the wire. I gave you a fair answer. Do I make myself plain?"

Ab Gunderson's lean, wind-burned face puckered with a puzzled frown. "Maybe you ain't really the boss of this store," he said. "Maybe the boss will be back later. This money is goot money; you don't have to worry about that."

"Sorry," McCord said. "I can't sell you a thing."

"That's what you got this store for, ain't it?" Gunderson said. "To sell things? I guess you ain't the boss. Or I guess maybe you're afraid of somebody. That Jess Sargent, maybe, who sent his foreman to see us. This ain't the first town I've been where people was afraid to sell."

Something snapped inside Jim McCord then. "Fetch your wagon around to the loading platform," he said, his voice brittle. "We'll weigh up the wire and load it. There's only one boss in this store, and I'm it."

"Goot!" said Ab Gunderson and went to get his wagon.

IT TOOK them a half hour to weigh the wire and load it, and after that money changed hands and was placed in the till, and McCord went back to his work. It was a slack hour of mid-afternoon, and Jess Sargent and Jade Ringo came in so silently that this was the second time today that McCord was startled to raise his eyes from his counter and find someone facing him.

Sargent's face was redder than usual and anger was in his eyes, but Ringo, a lean, whiplash of a man, had a cool implacability about him that was even more threatening. Sargent said, "They tell me that one of those stubble-jumpers just drove out of town with a wagon loaded with barbed wire. There's only one place he could have bought it. Have you forgotten what was decided at the meeting?"

McCord came around the counter and put his back to it, bracing himself with the heels of his hands. "Cory Timberline spoke for himself and for those that were as willing as him to lick your boots," he said. "He didn't speak for me. Yet, even then, I wasn't going to sell the wire at first. But I sold it because this is my store and selling is my business."

"And next month my stock will be straying into that wire to be torn up, and I'll be fighting screwworm in my horses!" Sargent said, his anger choking him. "Jade!"

Ringo moved then, his fist arcing upward, and because McCord had his eyes on Sargent and didn't see the blow coming, the fist caught him along the jaw and dumped him to the floor. Ringo kicked him, planting his boot hard against McCord's ribs, and the breath went out of McCord and he could only lie there, and that was good, perhaps, for though his body wouldn't obey

him, his mind could go racing, and he had this moment for thinking.

He could understand many things now: why Charley Weaver had stocked barbed wire but never sold it, and why, perhaps, Weaver had chosen to give up a prospering business and leave this range for Indiana. Weaver had wanted to be boss in his own store, too, and had found out that that couldn't be, not as long as Jess Sargent rode with long spurs. And McCord understood too, now, that if a man were to stay in this town he would have to do things Sargent's way because it was Sargent's town. That was the size of it, and now there was the old choice to be made all over again, and he had to know his mind before he got to his feet.

If he got up as Jim McCord would have gotten up, full of fury and fight and ready to take the two of them on, then he would be Jim McCord again, spewed from that grave in Buffalo. And if he got up as Mack James would have to get up, subservient and beaten, he would be Jess Sargent's man for the rest of his days in Tumbleweed. But how in the good hell could a man be two men in one?

"Come on, Ringo," Sargent was saying, his voice seemingly dim and distant. "Those sod-busters may have bought barbed wire, but they'll never get a chance to string it. There's nothing left to do now but hit 'em and hit hard."

His boot jolted McCord. "And you can hit the grit out of here," Sargent added. "You knew so much about the Johnson County war that I wired your description to Wyoming just to see what they might have to say about you. A telegram was fetched from the railroad on today's stage. They didn't know a Mack James, but they remembered a Jim McCord with a scar at the corner of his left eyebrow. If you'd strung along with me, I'd have kept shut. But now Wyoming law is going to be on your damned trail just as fast as I can wire back."

McCord heard the beat of their boots against the floor's planking, the slamming of the front door. Then he pulled himself painfully to his feet, his head spinning. The truth was out—the truth about Wyoming. And that meant that the choice as to what kind of a man he might be was now no longer his.

CHAPTER FOUR

A Time for Guns

HE STOOD leaning against the counter for a long time, a mixture of many emotions in him, and the greatest was an anger that gave him a driving need to be after Jess Sargent and Jade Ringo with a gun in his hand. He could do that now, for he was Jim McCord again. A telegram from Wyoming had made him so. But he was still stunned from the shock of Ringo's fist, and in his inner consciousness was a clamor that there was something he should be doing, but he couldn't place exactly what it was. Then he realized that he had to be clearing out of here. Wyoming law would have a long arm.

He went upstairs to his quarters and packed his personal belongings. The guns were in the bureau drawer, and he cleaned and oiled these and examined the loads, then took a belt and holsters from the saddle-bag he'd fetched to Tumbleweed. For the first few moments the guns seemed strange against his thighs. He slung the saddle-bag over his shoulder and went down to the lean-to where he stabled his horse, and when he had gear on the mount he came back into the store, absently hung the CLOSED sign in the front door and locked up. There were no Square S horses at the hitch-rail before Cory Timberline's saloon, so McCord went then to a restaurant and ordered himself supper, for the sun was now perched upon the hills to the west, and afterward he asked for food to take with him on the trail.

"Anybody seen Jess Sargent?" he asked before he left the restaurant.

"Him and Ringo rode out quite a while ago. Headed toward their ranch."

Which, McCord remembered, was the same trail that might take a man to the railroad where a second telegram could be sent to Wyoming.

Returning to the lean-to, he placed the package of food in the saddle-bag, then stepped up to the saddle. He walked the mount slowly along the main street, looking neither to the left nor the right, until a man hailed him from the porch of a saloon. The fellow was a Flying W rider, and McCord reined up beside him.

(Please turn to page 93)

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THE COWBOY CARUSO

THE heavy storms that covered the West in February and early March of 1861 caused that season to be remembered by ranchers as "the year of the big snow." In any one of the drifts that piled among the mountains, the whole of San Francisco could have been neatly dropped out of sight, and by the time the April sunshine had gone to work the grazing land of the entire West, from the high border down through Colorado, was one soggy, muddy morass. Only a few tightly-packed trails and the mountain meadows remained firm enough to support a horse and rider—or a cow.

Hyatt Wilson, whose purple cussing had earned him a dishonorable discharge from the only church organization within two hundred miles, prayed long and earnestly that spring as the calving began. So did his neighbors. Spring thunderstorms in the Idaho hills always stirred up the worst of the year's stampedes, and a stampede, through this soggy glue—Hy hated to think about it. Whole herds crippled by broken legs, or dying, smothered, in the trampled mud.

"Please don't let it rain," Hyatt muttered informally, rolling his worried eyes at the darkening sky. "Please don't let it!"

A low roll of thunder and a flash of forked lightning answered his plea. The Wilson's main herd, gathered in a tight, frightened bunch in the valley, began to mill uncomfortably, the big steers shaking their long, hooked horns against the purpling sky.

"Boyd!" Hy summoned his son with a frightened bawl. "Boyd! Git a-singin'!"

Young Boyd Wilson grinned uncomfortably as he swung up in his saddle and started for the herd. He knew his local reputation for having a voice "like soothing syrup" but its uncanny effect continued to startle him. Why should his singing mean so much to a bunch of ugly, skittish longhorns? He didn't know.

When he got within earshot of the nervous critters he obediently opened his mouth and began to warble. He sang *Oh, Sweet Susan Brown, My Idaho Homeland* and several hymns. At the same time, the storm broke over the herd; thunder crashed, lightning streaked and the rain poured down in a solid sheet.

Hy Wilson, watching from his front porch, saw the wild-faced cattle turn toward the crooner, lift their heads and, he swore, sway in time to the music. Then, despite the rain and the howling wind, they lay down comfortably on the sod, tucking their legs beneath them and nodding lazily as though it were a fine summer day.

Boyd came riding triumphantly homeward. "Did it agin," he chuckled, swinging the water off his wide hat and shaking his head in bewilderment. "Guess I better ride down to Walloper Jones' spread and see how he's makin' out."

Jones, a nearby rancher, was having trouble. Boyd heard the bawling cattle and their stamping feet a quarter-of-a-mile away and by the time he drew up to the edge of the herd he was once again in full song. It had the same miraculous effect.

Jones wiped his forehead, thanked Boyd fervently and paid him his regular "soothing fee"—three dollars. The singer rode on. Once, the Idaho minstrel had spent twenty-

four hours in the saddle, singing continuously, stopping at most every ranch in the valley. That was the summer when a horde of vicious blowflies had nearly driven the cattle loco. In that small, jewel-like pocket in the rough Idaho hills, Boyd Wilson was regarded as a cross between a witch doctor and a God-given artist and was accorded the respect due to each.

But Boyd had been thinking for a long time that there ought to be a bigger job in the world for a talented singer like himself. He longed for the little he knew about footlights and face paint and wild applause. His voice, he knew, had more than a flexible ability to hit high notes and low; it had a certain something, and Boyd suspected, even in his innocence, that it could be made to pay off.

"Reckon I'll try the big town," he said casually to his father. Hy nodded without protesting. He had never expected his pint-sized ranch to hold this talented offspring. Soberly, he made him a present of his own best roan and saw him off down the trail.

"The big town," to Boyd, was Plank City, Montana, a bustling mining metropolis of some 2500, just ten miles on the other side of the border. Boyd Wilson hit that town like a shooting star. Evidently his wistful magnetic voice was just what the population had been waiting for—the female population anyway. And his yellow-haired good looks sealed his fate. In two days, his name was on every tongue and Boyd Wilson was Montana's first matinee idol.

HIS initial appearance was on a street corner. Holding his wide sombrero in his hand, rolling his eyes theatrically toward the sky, he sang. There were about five hundred women in Plank City and when the last notes of his first selection died away, fully half of them were gathered on that street corner, fighting desperately, clawing, hair-pulling and kicking to get near him.

His battered hat was so loaded with hard money that he could hardly hold it steady. Eager hands tore pieces from his jacket and shirt for souvenirs. Before such adoration, Boyd Wilson began to retreat.

"Take it easy, ladies," he begged. "Please, ladies, please!" But the fact that he not only sang but talked, as well, was enough to set off another shower of excited squeals.

"Isn't he sweet?"

"I just can't hear enough of him!"

"Oooo, I have his tie!"

By this time, there was enough bare spots of the Wilson anatomy exposed to the western breeze to make the would-be celebrity feel slightly embarrassed, not to say chilly. Desperately, he decided on a frontal offensive and, plunging forward through the crowd, fled down the street with the demonstrative women of Plank City in his wake. Coatless, his shirt in tatters, he burst through the sheltering doors of an all-male saloon and staggered, panting, to the bar.

"Rye, quick!" he gasped. "They're after me!" He flung the hatful of coins down on the bar. Two ten dollar gold pieces bounced out and rolled down the mahogany.

The barkeep took one glance at the pile of cash and reached for a bungstarter. Then he grabbed the singer by what was left of his collar. "Who's after you? The sheriff?" he demanded.

"The women!" stammered Boyd, still short of breath. "They won't follow me in here, will they?" Quickly, he told what had happened. Several men, following him in from the street, added to the story. The barkeep looked stunned, then thoughtful.

"Follow you in here?" he said at last. "Man, you can bet your life they will!" And he pounded Boyd enthusiastically on the back. "We're in the entertainment business from now on!"

"Who, me?" asked Boyd doubtfully, looking over his shoulder at the street outside. But no one bothered to answer him. Working day and night, the barkeep, Anthony Cellar, and two of his friends, managed to convert the sidestreet saloon into a cabaret, complete with stage and piano player. The outside was painted a bright scarlet, and an idealized portrait, giant-sized, of Boyd Wilson dominated the doorway.

On opening night, the place took in $1100. Even in that gold-careless town, it was a sensation. Anthony Cellar had struck a richer vein of gold in the simple cowboy singer than all his friends who labored with pick and shovel in the hills.

From the beginning it was evident that

the women of Plank City pulled the purse strings. The men in the audience were a surly, jealous bunch, and with every hysterical ovation Boyd received from his devoted followers, black, baleful glares were directed his way from the males.

It began to get Boyd, after a while. He was only twenty-three, and sensitive, and the men did not bother to lower their voices as they made snide remarks about the kind of man who would stoop to making a living like a chorus girl. One fellow, in particular, a dark-faced, heavily-bearded miner, was doing his best to be offensive.

The music stopped with a discordant crash as Boyd stopped singing and held up his hand. "The next varmint," he said, in his soft-spoken mountain accent, "that says anything I don't like is going to regret it."

"Whatcha gonna do," howled the black-bearded man, "slap my hands?"

Boyd answered by drawing a gun. He waited until his opponent had his own weapon held lightly and expertly in his palm. Then they fired together, Boyd leaning down over the footlights to shield his eyes from the glare. Women screamed and men swore as the dark, squat man fell heavily on his face. Stepping back on the stage, Boyd signaled the musician to strike up where he had left off. Boyd crooned with all his old tenderness,

"Oh, sweet Susan Brown,
Sweet Susan Brown."

But it was not the same. Slowly, the crowd filtered out, casting nervous glances at the inert body in the aisle, and throwing looks of grudging admiration at the cool, unshaken singer. Boyd's brief career was over.

Plank City tried to hang him. Dave Goodall, the man he had killed, owned half of the huge silver mountain to which the town owed its prosperity. And not a man in Plank City, except the sorrowful bar-keep, would be sorry to see the popular singer swing on almost any count. Meekly, Boyd submitted to arrest and began a long vigil in jail. But nothing could stop him from singing.

His songs, floating out through the jail-house window, became sadder and sadder. He sang wistfully of the green meadows at home and the peaceful ranch, of his mother and his poor old father, of a sweet young rancher's daughter who would wait, now, forever. Gathering in crowds outside, the women of Plank City heard him and wept floods of sympathetic tears.

In the homes of Plank City, the men were miserable. Their wives and mothers and sisters, red-eyed with weeping, burned every meal that was set on the table, went about their household duties garbed in black and maintained silence.

Then, after Boyd had been in jail for a month, the women took more positive action. Bessie Kelly, plump wife of Plank City's mayor, led a parade after nightfall that circled the town and grew to include everyone who wore skirts. Torchlights flared smokily against the night sky and local flags waved proudly while the women, nearly five hundred strong, chanted, "Free Boyd Wilson! Free Boyd Wilson! They stopped at the jail, where Boyd leaned through the bars and rendered one number after another. Then, cheering and singing themselves, they routed the sheriff out.

The law had had enough. Bleary-eyed and in his nightshirt, the sheriff opened the door of Boyd's cell and thumbed toward the great outdoors. "Git!" he said briefly.

It was a humbled artist that limped up the road toward Idaho. His pockets were still lined with the gold he had earned in his first public appearance, but his heart was heavy and his spirit was dragging in the dust. He turned, at the last bend in the trail, a slender, romantic figure in the moonlight, to wave a last farewell to the faithful women and girls and old maids who had accompanied him up the road.

Then, suddenly, as he jingled two coins between his fingers, he felt much better. After all, he reflected, it wasn't much of a man who would make his living singing in a dancehall. From now on he would do all his singing to the Idaho longhorns. He was a cowpoke, not a fancy-pants.

And aside from one more trip East, where he saw brief service in the Civil War, Idaho was where he stayed. From time to time he scribbled a few songs of his own which he tried out on his restless cows, and when he died in 1897 there were only a few women in Plank City old enough to remember and mourn the passing of Idaho's musical phenomenon.

(Continued from page 88)

"Mae asked me to deliver a message if I saw you," the cowboy said. "She and her dad would like you to come out for Sunday dinner."

"Thanks," McCord said, no more than that. He'd be far gone from this range by Sunday.

"Here's a list of medicines," the rider said, and extended a slip. "Mae thought you might be carrying some of this stuff in the store. She wants you to fetch it out Sunday."

A flicker of real interest touched McCord. "Somebody's sick?"

"Not at the ranch," the rider said. "It's the wife of one of those Antler Creek nesters. Mae's been riding over there every evening to see what she could do." The fellow grinned. "You must have sold a bill of goods, mister, when you made your spiel at the town hall. I didn't expect to see the Wiltons being neighborly to nesters."

McCord shrugged, pocketing the slip. Mae could come to the store and help herself when the news got around that Mack James was gone and apparently for good. This, then, was his farewell to Tumbleweed, but he turned and looked back after he'd quit the town, and in him was a greater regret than he'd supposed he'd know, that and a certain bitterness because a man could do a good job of rebuilding his life but a telegram could change all that.

This took his mind to Jess Sargent again, and to Jade Ringo, and he fingered his jaw where Ringo's fist had left a faint mark. There was that one last score to settle, but there was no wisdom in tarrying when every hour could put more miles behind him. Besides, he'd had his vengeance; he'd gotten it when he'd sold that barbed wire, but he had to grin at the cart-before-the-horse kind of thinking that that was. He jogged his mount to a steady, mile-eating pace, heading in a generally northeastern direction. He'd have a look at the Dakotas and keep himself close to the Canadian line, he decided.

He followed Antler Creek because the trail led along that brawling, willow-fringed stream; the sun faded and the brief twilight ended and then there was a bad, blind hour, but after that the moon rose to the east, big and luminous. He turned away from the creek and its monotonous babbling then and

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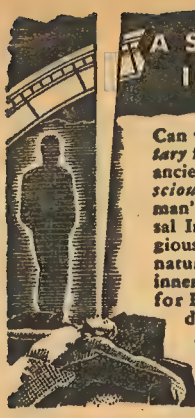

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headed directly overland, and it was when he paused on the crest of a hill to study the sprawling country ahead that he heard the gunfire—the sullen roar of Winchesters and the staccato barking of .45s.

HE GAUGED these sounds with all the instincts of the trade he'd thought to put behind him; he judged that the guns were barking near the creek bank, farther to the north and the east, and he wondered about that, thinking of the country as an empty desolation, until he remembered the camp of the nesters. And, remembering that, he remembered other things: Sargent saying, "Come on, Ringo. Those sod-busters may have bought barbed wire, but they'll never get a chance to string it. There's nothing left to do now but hit 'em and hit hard. . ."

He hadn't supposed that Sargent meant to make war this very night, but he was remembering, too, that Sargent and Ringo hadn't tarried in town but had headed for the Square S. But the thought that was the searing one, stirring him to a sudden fear and a sudden fury, was the remembrance of the Flying W rider who'd said that Mae Wilton had taken to riding to Antler Creek each evening.

He came down the slant of the hill with no thought of what it might mean if a horse somersaulted here, and he lined out across the broken grassland like a man possessed, nearly spilling himself in the first coulee he came to, and again on the slope of the second. He was heading straight toward the spot where those guns were barking, and he was spurred by only one idea and that was to get there as fast as the horse could carry him, rage burning like a cold flame within him at the thought that he might be too late. Then he saw the fire and was able to orient himself by it, and, nearer, he made out the three wagons. They were spaced perhaps fifty yards apart and the canvas tilts of one of them was ablaze and by this light riders were silhouetted, ten or more of them, who rode Indian style, circling one of the wagons and pouring a steady fire in upon the people who defended it.

Those riders had masked themselves by the simple expedient of pulling their bandannas up over their noses. This McCord saw as he drew closer. And McCord under-

stood the masking, for here was Jess Sargent's way of keeping himself out of a court of law later. Who was the man who could truly swear that Sargent had ridden tonight? Yet there was no mistaking the bigness of the man, even in a saddle, nor the lean build of Jade Ringo; and if Mae Wilton was still here and was with those besieged nesters, she would know and remember. But Jess Sargent would be taking that into account, and Mae would not live out this night. That was the way it would have to be.

But not if Jim McCord was to have a say in this game. He came charging into that circle of riders; his horse crashed against another, nearly unseating the rider, and he had a quick glimpse of the frosty eyes of Jade Ringo and saw the man's gun tilt up; and powder scorched McCord's cheek before he got his own gun going. His shot drove Ringo out of the saddle for it hit the Square S's foreman high and hard in the chest. Then McCord was through the ring and to the wagon, piling off his horse and running to the flimsy shelter of a high wheel; and he might have died then from anybody's lead except that Ab Gunderson cried loudly, "Wait! It's the storekeeper that sold us the barbed wire!"

But it was no storekeeper who'd come among them. Jim McCord's trade was a deadlier one, and the things that a man had learned once stayed with him, and he was in command here instantly. "Spread out!" he shouted. "Don't bunch here under the wagon so that all of you make one solid target! Some of you try to get through that line so we can give it to them from both sides. And save your lead till you're sure of your shooting. You"—he grasped the elbow of a tawny-haired, teen-aged son of one of the nesters—"get that blunderbuss down! You're shooting away over their heads."

Mae's voice spoke from somewhere in the shadowy depth under the wagon; she was there, dimly silhouetted, the sick woman held in her arms. "And Sargent believed that the thought of guns might sicken you!" she said.

That was how he came to know for sure that she was still here, but he made her no reply; he was doing his speaking with his guns and it was to those racing riders out

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there at the fireglow's rim. His steadiness had become a contagion, spreading among the nesters; there were five of them in all, counting two teen-agers, and McCord made a sixth. They knew little of fighting, these people—they were a passive breed—but he taught them much in a matter of a very few minutes, and most of it by example. They were emptying saddles now, and somewhere out in the darkness a man cursed monotonously and made a poor attempt at crawling away.

"I got one!" the tawny-haired boy cried not many minutes later, but he'd only unhorsed his man; the fellow came to an awkward stand and stood like a bear beset by bees, pawing at the air but still able to wield a gun. He was Jess Sargent himself, his bandanna jerked down, and there was still fight in him, and courage too, for he came marching toward the wagon, firing as he came, and then McCord was out from under the wagon and coming erect and striding toward Sargent.

"This was the way it had to be," McCord said. "You and me at the finish, Sargent." And a great and unholy joy was in him.

HE WASN'T sure whether Sargent heard him, but he saw the astonishment that spread across Sargent's florid face and he knew that Sargent had recognized him, and he knew also that not until this moment had Sargent realized who it was who had crashed through the lines and turned the tide of battle.

"Damn you!" Sargent said, and tilted his gun.

McCord felt the shock of that bullet; it ran fire along his ribs, and Sargent's second shot did something to his leg that made standing seem more effort than a man wanted to expend. McCord came down to one knee and got in his own shot then, a slow and careful shot, for when a man followed Jim McCord's trade he learned to make his bullets count. He saw Sargent lurch and sit down heavily, and that was almost laughable except that Sargent's face was a shapeless smear and the man was dead.

Somebody shouted, "They're running! They're turning tail and running!"

That was how it was, McCord remembered. That was how it always was with the men who fought only because another

man paid them to fight. He'd run himself in other days when his paymaster had gone down to defeat. And it came to him now that tonight, for the first time, he'd given his guns to a cause for no other reason than because it was his wish. It was a good thought and he tried hard to cling to it, but the earth was spinning and he wondered if he'd been hit harder than he knew.

Somebody had a pair of arms around him and was cradling him, and he looked up into the eyes of Mae Wilton. "You shouldn't have been here," he said weakly.

"Hush!" she cried. "Who was it who told us we couldn't turn back the clock? We're going to have these nester people for neighbors whether we like it or not—we know that now. It's your own doing if I tried to be neighborly."

He supposed he should say something in return, but he couldn't make his mind work. Not with the darkness crowding in. . . .

He opened his eyes to find himself in his own bed in his own quarters over the store and there were quite a few people crowded into the room, a doctor among them. Sunlight was streaming through a window, and that didn't make sense, for it was supposed to be night. He still felt weak, but the giddiness was gone, and his first thought was that he had to get these people out of here so he could skin into his pants and be gone. Wyoming's law had gained a day on him and Jess Sargent had likely sent someone to start another telegram on its way before Sargent had ridden to his death.

Somebody said, "He's awake!"

"And all of you are clearing out," the doctor said.

But Mae lingered at the door, even after

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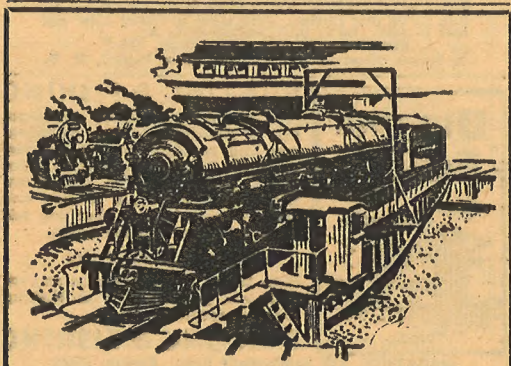

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the doctor himself had gone, and McCord called her to him then, and he said, "I've got to tell you all about a man—a man named Jim McCord." And he did, the story taking in those five years when he'd plied the only trade he'd known, and he told her, too, about the man who was buried in Buffalo and of the decision that had come when Jim McCord had been the only mourner at his own funeral. And at the end he told her about the telegram.

Mae said, "Yes, I saw the telegram he got from Wyoming. It was found on his body last night. But it doesn't matter whether he sent a second telegram. He was bluffing when he said that Wyoming law would be after you. The telegram said that your description fit a certain Jim McCord who was presumably dead, but it also said that no charges were to be brought against the men who'd fought in the Johnson County war."

He said dazedly, "Then I'm free!"

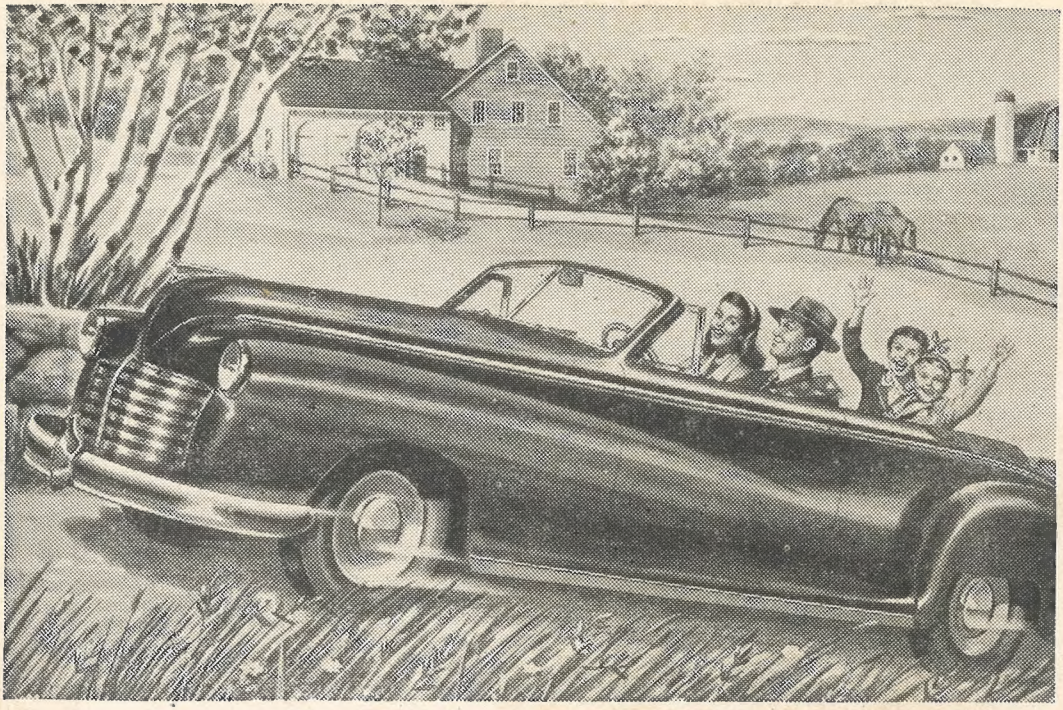
"Free," she echoed softly. "To be either Jim McCord or Mack James, whichever you choose."

"Which would you like?" he asked.

It took her a long moment to reply. "Mack James asked me to think about something once," she said then. "It took me quite a while to make up my mind about him. Maybe it was because he wasn't militant enough. Maybe the man I'd want would have to be something of both Mack James and Jim McCord—a man who'd want to keep a store and make it grow with a town, yet who'd buckle on his guns when he found a fight that mattered to him."

All this Jim McCord turned over in his mind, and he wondered then why he'd never seen this matter as she was seeing it now. For that was the way it was and would always be. A man couldn't erase all that he'd been. A man could reshape himself but the shadow of the man he'd once been would walk with him always. But as he drew her down to him and felt the sweet surrender of her lips, he thought of something else, too: of the cemetery in Buffalo and the old man who'd believed that Jim McCord would never have a second chance. Yes, that old one had indeed been wrong, for now Jim McCord had died again, yet he was to have still a third chance.

THE END



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